Morton Man Working To Preserve French Language, Culture In Louisiana

By ART ANDREWS
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Parlez Francois et faites de bonnes affaires. A phrase like that, inserted into a magazine advertisement, might be puzzling to many Americans.

But it were spoken to anyone of one and a half million French-speaking people who had settled on the northeast seacoast of Canada, it would be music to the ears.

"Speak French and do good business." For down in Cajun country, or Acadia, as a portion of the state officially is known, there is a strong movement afoot to strengthen a proud heritage that began when many immigrants from France who had settled on the northeast seacoast of Canada refused to swear allegiance to the British government.

"Today many of them speak a kind of French that was spoken two centuries ago in France. But many are unable to read or write French," said Keith Philip Sommer in an interview last night.

Sommer, who is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Philip L. Sommer of Morton, is home for five days on a combination business and pleasure trip.

A GRADUATE of Morton Township High School and the University of Virginia, where he received a B.A. degree in government, the 23-year-old French-speaking Illinoisan started his first job in May as executive assistant to James Donmengaux, chairman of Conseil de developpement du Francais en Louisiane.

The goal of the Council for the Development of the French language in Louisiana, with headquarters in Lafayette, La., is to preserve and expand the place that the French language and culture have in modern-day Louisiana.

"Years ago these people were told that speaking French was un-American, making them second-rate citizens," Sommer explained.

ALTHOUGH FRENCH is basically native to Louisiana, the case of the language was frowned upon during World War I and following World War II because of America's "melting pot philosophy." All Americans should speak English, all of the time, he went.

Now, however, the situation is different. As outlined by Donmengaux in a recent article, "The day can be seen, no longer around the corner, when this country will have to deal with the rest of the world, and there is no higher position of strength it has, and will still have. "

"In the decorum, the United States will deal with the rest of the human race through the ability to understand other peoples, through the capacity to grasp other cultures. "And this can only be done, not by eliminating the strength it has and by adding the essential humanistic element of the intimate knowledge of languages."

The movement has taken hold and two years ago the Louisiana legislature passed two laws dealing with it. One authorized establishment of the Council and any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization and preservation of the French language as found in the State of Louisiana for the cultural and tourist benefit of the state."

THE OTHER law stated that by the 1977-78 school year all public elementary schools shall offer at least five years of French instruction, starting with oral French in the first grade, unless a school board requests to be excluded.

High schools shall offer at least three years of French and at least one course in the culture and history of the French populations of Louisiana and other French-speaking areas of the Americas. (New Hampshire and Maine, in our own country, also have considerable French populations.)

Thus, in a state where over a third of the population speak and understand French, introduction of the language in the lower grades will insure this asset for future generations and "make Louisiana a great bilingual labora tory in a rapidly shrinking world," Donmengaux says.

"From a tourist aspect, millions from French Canada pass through northern Louisi ana on their way to Florida and Mexico," Sommer said. "Many of these could be persuaded to stay in Louisiana.

And academically, "I went to school for years before picking up French," Sommer went on. "Now, Louisiana children can begin a second grade immediately in first grade."

THE "BUSINESS" part of Sommer's world, so far, has consisted of talking with local advertising firms, encouraging them to use French phrases, especially in publications reaching Louisiana. "The first few companies found it paid off if they mixed French and English," he said.

Last week Texaco started bilingual advertising.

Sommer, who worked eight months for VISTA in Louisiana helping with federal community action programs in poverty areas, now works for Donmengaux, a former congressman and well-to-do lawyer, using his training in government to work with political leaders and others.

At the moment, his current projects have been sending 74 teachers to France and Guadaloupe on a study program July 3, and the forthcoming four-week study trip of 130 teachers and students to Quebec where they will learn the value of "sauvan notre heritage francais."

Let's save our French heritage.