James Donald Faulk is a one-man crusade to save the rapidly disappearing Cajun language. His recently completed book, "Cajun French," constitutes the first published guide to the grammar and pronunciation of the language of a unique ethnic group in the U.S. — the Louisiana Cajuns.

He wrote the book essentially for his students, friends and neighbors in and around Abbeville, but the response he has received from it has come from all over the United States.

"I guess I underestimated the demand there would be for such a book," he comments with amazement, "because I sold out the first printing in three months. Only two days out of the last three months have I not received at least one order for my book." And it truly has been an amazing response to a book that some would consider just the tiniest bit esoteric.

*GENERALLY*, Faulk receives one to fifteen orders a day for anywhere from one to fifteen or twenty copies of his book. Many of the orders are from his fellow Cajuns in and around Abbeville. Others, though, are from places that aren't even close to Louisiana — Butte Falls, Oregon, for example.

"I got this letter from a sheriff in Butte Falls, or was it Butte Creek, in Oregon somewhere, for one of my books. Now what in the world does a sheriff in Butte Falls, Oregon, want with a guide to Cajun grammar?" Where Faulk has taught Cajun French, student...
There has been little or no advertising of the book. A few articles have appeared locally and the New York Times reviewed it, but other than that, Faulk has relied mostly on word of mouth to sell the book. But in Abbeville, word of mouth, it seems, is the most effective marketing tool.

Faulk distributes the book from his own doorstep. People are always stopping by to pick up a copy or two for their children or friends. Faulk did send a number of copies to the LSU Bookstore in Baton Rouge — in deference to the fact that the LSU Romance Language Department began offering a course in Cajun French this fall.

LIKE FAULK, the LSU Bookstore has received numerous requests for “Cajun French.” Patricia Hamilton of the bookstore’s staff commented, “We have gotten letters from all over the country — even Canada, which is not surprising, I guess, and Mexico, which is! And the book’s not cheap!” It costs $19.75.

Both Faulk and Ms. Hamilton love to conjecture as to what Mr. and Mrs. X in Casper, Wyoming, are doing with a copy of “Cajun French” in their library. “Displaced Cajuns” and “linguists with exotic tastes” are the ideas that come up most frequently.

Whatever the reason, the response to “Cajun French” has been nothing, if not enthusiastic. Faulk said that people call him up frequently and ask why he did not write the book twenty years sooner.

“Because it wouldn’t have been acceptable twenty years ago,” is his response. It has only been recently that people have been interested in preserving the Cajun language and culture. Faulk can remember when his teachers would not allow him to speak Cajun at all.

Faulk, 52, was born and reared on a farm outside Abbeville. Neither his grandparents nor his parents spoke English and he only learned it when he went to school. His was the first generation in his family that was even allowed to go to school, much less to learn English.

For a long time, the Cajuns didn’t really believe in schools, he explained. They were essentially a culture of farmers and for them, reading, writing and arithmetic were hardly relevant to planting and harvesting crops. Plus, schools were always linked to the Anglo-American culture that surrounded the Cajuns after they fled Canada. Relations between the Cajuns and the English response has been tremendous.

“Now, all of a sudden, they can go home and talk to Grandma and Grandpa in their own language. They are just thrilled — not to mention Grandma and Grandpa.”

AS THE YEARS have passed, Cajun French has been mostly the province of the middle-aged and the elderly residents of the Cajun towns and communities south of Lafayette. It is still a viable language in this section of the state and more often than not, it is the language that one hears as one walks down the streets of towns like Abbeville.

The children and young people, however, learn only English in school. Cajun functions as a sort of “grown-ups language,” what mother and father use when they don’t want their kids to know what they’re talking about.

Faulk says that when he first began teaching Cajun French his students would come back with gleeful stories of having “caught” their parents saying something, “they thought we couldn’t understand.”

When asked what he thought about Codofil (The Council for Development of French in Louisiana — an organization that has brought French teachers from France to teach French in Louisiana schools), Faulk said that although he possesses a great affection for the French language, it is not the same as the Cajun language.

He and many other Cajuns feel that if the point of French/English bilingual education programs in the state is to help preserve and maintain the Cajun culture and heritage, then the Cajun’s own language is the one that should be taught. Of course, up to this point, it has been difficult to teach Cajun French because the language was never written down. But Faulk hopes that his book will help remedy this situation.

FAULK EXPLAINED that at one point in history, the French spoken in France and the French spoken in Louisiana were one and the same.

“But that was back in the 18th century,” he laughs. After Napoleon sold off Louisiana, the Cajuns had very little contact with their French confreres and their culture, including the language, developed along its own separate pathways.

The differences between the two languages are very interesting. One of the most confusing things for an American who is learning French to understand is the
were never very cordial to begin with, so the Cajuns never sent their children to school with English-speaking children.

Faulk's grandfather absolutely refused to let any of his children go to school. As a result, Faulk's father vowed that all of his own four children would learn to read and write.

AFTER SURMOUNTING the hurdle of starting school in a foreign language, Faulk discovered that he really had quite a knack for learning languages. He went on to get a master's degree in Spanish from the University of Missouri and to teach Spanish and French at various schools across the country.

He came to write the book after many years of teaching French (and English, when he couldn't find any way of avoiding it) at Crowley High School. He says in the introduction to the book, "Through the years, I have heard complaints from discouraged students who were studying French, that no one understood them at home, or from others who resented having to learn to express themselves in a manner different from what they always heard in their homes. The idea for this book, I believe, was sparked by one student who said he wished he could speak French to be able to converse with his grandmother. That definitely had to be Cajun French."

It is of great concern to him that the Cajun language is dying — not because he holds the language itself in any great reverence, but because its death deprives so many people of the ability to communicate with members of their own families — or friends — or with older members of the community.

"Imagine never having spoken to your own grandmother before," he says poignantly.

He hopes that now that there is a textbook from which to teach Cajun French, more schools will offer students the opportunity to study it. At the moment, though, there is an unfortunate stumbling block. The book has been approved by the State Department of...