Center for Louisiana Studies, students work to preserve French Louisiana culture

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Tucked away in a room on the third floor of the Edith Garland Dupré library, researchers play tapes more than 70 years old to piece together oral histories and folk songs originating in the Acadiana area.

The Center for Louisiana Studies, an archival effort on the part of the College of Liberal Arts to preserve and record materials from past Louisiana generations, is the home for those records.

"Our initiative is to perpetuate the scholarship and study of Louisiana culture and history predominantly... (We have) the world's largest collection of material related to the oral traditions of French Louisiana," Director of the Center for Louisiana Studies, Joshua Caffery, Ph.D., said.

In the center, everything from reel-to-reel tapes from the 1940s to moving image films to "wire recordings" dating back to the turn of the 20th century are collected, played and converted to digital format, according to John "Pudd" Sharp, the Assistant Director for Research at the center.

"This stack here is labeled to be cleaned outside of the archive because it's so nasty," Sharp said. "You can see that has mold and dust all over it and given that folklore is most typically thought of as an oral tradition... (cleaning and digitizing the material) is a way to memorialize these things and keep them so people can come to study them or access them."

Juliane Mahoney, a graduate student getting her Master's in English with a concentration in folklore and who works at the center, said students should come to the center if they are interested in local history.

"Personally I know I had a lack of knowledge about local history before I came here," Mahoney said. "I grew up around here but I didn't even think about any of this kind of stuff. I sort of got into the music and that made me want to learn the language."

Renee Reed, a sophomore majoring in traditional music with a concentration in Cajun and Creole music, said she identifies as Cajun and plays Cajun music with her family. Reed said her father, Mitchell Reed, is a former member of the local band BeauSoliel.

"My dad's family is from Mamou and my mom's family is from Scott," Reed said. "They've been playing Cajun music and my grandparents played Cajun music. It's hard to imagine myself without that."

Reed said more authentic Cajun music and Louisiana French as a whole is at risk of being lost.

"My (grandparents) couldn't speak French because they were not allowed to speak French in school, and so my parents' generation didn't grow up speaking French," Reed said. "It's dying out, the language part of it."

Reed added broken styles of Cajun music such as "coche" are also dying out.

University of Louisiana at Lafayette French Language Program Coordinator Tamara Lindner, Ph.D., said older generations avoid passing on Louisiana French due to psychological effects from being punished in school.

"When you go back to that era of punishment, that really permeated how people feel about their French... They internalize that so much. That's why it didn't get passed on. You didn't want to pass on something that was unappreciated," Lindner said.

Lindner said she teaches upper-level French courses through a more local lens, such as FREN 424, in which students interview a person who speaks Louisiana French. She also said she integrates Louisiana French activities into the lower-level French courses.

"The textbook that we use, it does have some Louisiana content. In French 102, several of the readings and longer activities are with Louisiana French and based on Louisiana French," Lindner said, adding French 102 students listen to a Lost Bayou Ramblers song for one activity.

Matt Mick, the communications officer for the council for the development of French in Louisiana, said Louisiana French and Cajun Culture are not at risk of being lost.

"If we think in these terms of preserving something, it becomes really
Mick added the newer generations of Louisiana residents have embraced Louisiana-French and local cultures more than previous generations.

"South Louisiana is not a bubble; we're a part of America," Mick said.

Mick said a couple of generations ago, this wave of Americanization swept the country—and Louisiana was included in that.

"Now we're maybe at a moment of reaction to that," Mick said. "All over the country, people are rediscovering where they're from."

tricky because you're closing out the possibilities for this thing to continue to grow and change and develop," Mick said. "That process of growth and change and development is part of what makes the culture in Louisiana so rich in my opinion."