FIVE NEW ORLEANS INTERESTED in the preservation of the French language in Louisiana view a 15th Century Guatemala statue of King Louis IX with JEAN H. LE CANNELLIER, standing, far left, at the French Consulate here. Seated are PAUL SCHREINER, a student at LSUNO, and CAROLYN SHEPARD, a student at LSUNO, and

By ALLAN KATZ

Soyez fiere de votre langue.
As all students of French know, that means "be proud of your language."

That is the war cry of thousands of Louisiana proud of their French heritage who want to keep alive the use of the language in Louisiana.
The effort has the backing of the legislature, which founded CODIFIL (Council for the Development of French in Louisiana) and provided a grant of $93,000 to get the effort going.
CODIFIL's man in New Orleans is James F. Bezou, whose own French-American lineage goes back to colonial times.
Bezou says CODIFIL is essentially fighting two trends that work against the preservation of the French language in Louisiana.

— Americans tend to be monolingual (one-language) as opposed to being bi-lingual or tri-lingual as in some other countries. The American experience generally is that the first generation has immigrated to the U.S. and kept the "old country" tongue while mastering English. The second generation speaks a little of the mother tongue and the third generation virtually none.

— The "Creole French" patois spoken in Louisiana has often been made the subject of jokes and ridicule. One of CODIFIL's problems is convincing the public that Creole French has a special ring to it for which much can be said. CODIFIL, in other words, doesn't insist on Parisian French or academic French.

Bezou and CODIFIL want to see French introduced into the public school curriculum in South Louisiana on a voluntary basis with parents having the final decision on whether their child takes it or not.

"Not only would that enrich the French culture in Louisiana but educators agree that it is good for a child to begin learning another language in the formative years in school," Bezou says. "In fact, it's amazing how quickly very young children can pick up a second language.

As most South Louisianians know, much of the section's French culture stems not only from the original Gallic explorers who came up the Mississippi but also from the tragic Acadian exiles who came here from Canada around 1755.

The Acadians were expelled from Canada by the British after the French-Indian War. The exile was cruelly executed and the 18,000 Acadians who made it to Louisiana survived great hardships. It is from that time that Longfellow wrote of Evangeline and betrothed she found at the moment of his death.

"Over a period of two centuries the French culture has had an enormous impact on South Louisiana," says Bezou. "This contribution to our ways is one of the reasons we are distinct and have our own identity at a time that so much of the world appears to have come off an assembly line."

"This distinct quality is something worth preserving.

Toward that end, CODIFIL sent 40 Louisianians students to Quebec for a summer program in French and dispatched another 100 Louisianians to a French university where they are studying the language.
The goal of all this is a hoped-for harvest in qualified teachers of French who could teach in area schools.

Bezou points with pride to billboards that are now sprouting throughout the state which read:

"Vive la Difference! Louisiana is different."

"Ici on parle francais (French is spoken here.)"

The state chairman of CODIFIL is James Domengeaux of Lafayette. He says:

"It is good for a man to know and love his culture and his heritage. It gives a man pride and I tell you that a proud man is a good man."