Reclaiming Heritage Is Aim
La.-Canada Project in Full Swing

BY EDGAR POE AND JARED STOUT
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Here in the rugged northern reaches of Quebec province, a band of Louisiana students is working to reclaim their heritage. It is a cultural drive that may make French a proud second language for their native state.

The drive is also an experiment in ethnic pride that federal experts are watching with interest. Hopefully it will yield new clues to the importance of the past as an aid to future progress of American minority groups.

Here at Jonquiere College, 145 miles north of Quebec City, the work involves 60 students, French-speaking descendants of 38,000 Acadians exiled from English Canada in 1755. They are learning the history and tradition their forebears brought from France.

The group came here because, since the United States Civil War, the cultural legacy of 4,000 exiled Acadians who settled in Southern Louisiana has nearly been obliterated. The French language became the pathos of Louisiana's poor in the eyes of the majority.

But things are changing through such programs as the Jonquiere effort, a four-week special course to sharpen the understanding of France and its language. And it's all part of a larger effort that has its base in Louisiana.

The hope is that with these high school and college age students return to their American homes, they'll carry with them new insight and appreciation of their background.

Although the cultural effort is only two years old, there are signs it is paying off with pride.

Shame felt by many French-speaking Louisiana who over the years have been called "Cajuns," "Boogalees," and other nicknames too foul to print, is fading.

New Bywords
More and more, the bywords are "Be proud. Be chic. Speak French." In increasing numbers, "Cajuns" are warming to the signboard slogan near the

Lafayette, La., headquarters of the cultural drive.

The slogan reads: "Vive la difference. Louisiana is different. Ici on parle Francais." (French is spoken here.)

The point for this effort is to bring back to the French language at least one of the community's leaders, who base in the French language division, advertisers, businessmen and the like.

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The program at Jonquiere College is but one of the council's undertakings. It also involves travel of 66 other students to the homes of Quebec families this summer, and has sent more than 70 teachers to France and the Island of Guadeloupe for study in French culture.

Courses Planned
This fall, with the help of federal funds, the council and the state and 60 students will undertake French courses in two of 21 predominantly Acadian parishes in the state. The goal is to make education bilingual, beginning in kindergarten and grades one and two.

In the long term, Domingueaux has said, the aim is bilingualism throughout the Acadian areas and, perhaps across the rest of the state into the northern areas, where the traditions are more Anglo-Saxon, again building on the idea that "A second language is an advantage instead of a mark of inferiority."

Homer Dyess, language specialist at the education department in Baton Rouge, shares Domingueaux's optimism about the long-term results of the bilingual effort. In a telephone interview, recently, he said he was "pleasantly surprised and very encouraged" about the future.

Good Response
Dyess said the northern sectors of Louisiana had responded well to the introduction of French in the early grades, as children have come to recognize, perhaps for reasons of status, the advantages of speaking another language.

But Dyess stressed employment opportunities in the state's oil and fishing industries, two of its mainstays, which make the employee who speaks French a prized worker. And others have noted the impact French has had on the state's tourist industry.

In 1969, for example, tourism produced $350 million in revenue and accounted for about 7 per cent of all taxes collected in the state. Some experts believe the increase over 1968 was directly related to the increasing numbers of French-speaking Canadians who visited the state.

And according to Louisiana Secretary of the Louisiana-Dominion's increasing use of French throughout the state can only mean further increases in the years ahead. At one council staff member put it, "The use of French makes such visitors comfortable and at home."

Principal Aim
Whether tourism increases or not on account of the new use of French by Louisianians remains to be seen, but, for Domingueaux's group, that is really an unexpected bonus. Their principal interest is in helping Acadians lose their feelings of inferiority.

A people noted historically for their generosity and intelligence, Domingueaux and his friends believe it is time to restore their culture to its rightful place, eliminating discrimination against Acadians and restoring their pride. Education specialist Dyess said the effort may have come just in time. Already, he said, children in Acadian homes have begun to lose touch with even spoken French, most of which was learned from bilingual parents.

And council members acknowledge that such practices as writing, "I will not speak French in school" on the blackboard 300 times, has become too common, until the council staff member France Lemay said, "Such things do not instill pride."

It still goes on to some extent. But with increasing contact between those of the French heritage and exchange programs, the council's efforts and the strong introduction of French into the schools, council members think a culture will be saved to become a cherished part of the state for all its people.

JAMES DOMENGEAUX LEADER OF MOVEMENT
for the development of French in Louisiana. Descendants of Acadians are made aware of their ties to France and French-speaking Canada.

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