LE MONDE DES ACADIENS

Stigma Great Hindrance To French Culture Cause

By HILDA GALLASSERO

One of the great hindrances to the cause of the French language and culture in Louisiana has been the stigma placed upon the Acadians. Instead of being able to look upon their knowledge of French as an asset that could open new doors, they learned to be ashamed of their French and to perceive it as a hindrance. They were often advised that "English was the language of the land" and in order to "rise above their station in life" they must forget French. In case after case this attitude has been traced to the mistaken notions of a teacher who warned her class that their French was "bad."

I have lived near bayous and have known bayou people all of my life, except the first seven years. Until I was seven, I had never heard French spoken and had not, to my knowledge, ever met a Cajun.

But when I was seven, we moved to Lowry — a rice farming community, located in Cameron Parish. Lowry, at that time, was a very isolated place. But it DID boast of a small two-room elementary school taught by a woman teacher. The teacher did not speak or understand French. Nor did she care to. That is not to her discredit, for she taught seven grades alone and unassisted.

I remember the day our teacher told us of the coming of the "river-rats" — that is how she referred to the little French children. I believe that some school authority or possibly a politician somewhere decided that the compulsory school law was really going to be enforced.

In Houseboats

From the way things happened around the little community, I think someone must have gone into all the trapping and fishing areas thereabouts and herded the Acadians out.

The law demanded that each child go to school until he or she was 15 years of age. Evidently this was either a new law or it had never been fully enforced before. Because that is when the trappers and fishermen began arriving in Lowry.

One afternoon, when my brothers and I were swimming in the river, we noted three houseboats tied up in the neck of the bayou. They had not been there the day before. The next afternoon, there were four more houseboats. And in a couple of days there was a total of 12 houseboats. It was as if a whole new village had sprung up right in our back yard. And I remember wondering where all these people had come from.

In school, we soon learned. Our teacher said, "I have something to tell you children. We are going to have a group of new pupils in our classroom tomorrow. I don't know how many. All I know is that most of them do not speak English at all."

"I will need your help," she continued. "I am going to assign each of you at least two "assigned" little Cajun children. We loved them. And we did our best. I was assigned a couple. Twins. Both of them bigger than me. Louis and Louise were their names. And they gave me a fit. (Because soon as I taught Louise how to say a few words, she promptly pitched me out of a skiff and I nearly drowned.)

Our English instruction was conducted mostly during recess however. That is when we took the children around the schoolyard and talked to them. "Fence", we would say, and point to the fence. "Tree", we would say and point to a living oak.

They were young and impressionable and they learned quickly. They had to. For they were punished if the teacher heard them say one word of French on the schoolground. As I recall, the hardest thing for them to learn was that when you speak English, you really should also THINK in English.

Mostly, they were thinking in French and trying to translate into English. And that is very hard to do, M'sieu.

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