LA CAUSE FRANCAISE, COMMENT ÇA VA?

An in-depth look at the movement to save French language and culture in South Louisiana

The French language movement in Louisiana has been in force for 15 years now, ever since 1970 when the state began importing teachers from abroad to teach French in Louisiana schools. If everything had worked as planned, all the kids in your neighborhood, whether surnamed Smith or LeBlanc, would be functionally literate in both French and English by now. Are they? Of course they aren't. Why? Because what started out as a "simple" educational experiment in bi-lingual education has developed into a full fledged social movement with issues and objectives every bit as complex as the obstacles it seeks to overcome.

It sounded simple back then at the beginning. Visionaries like James Domengeaux, Tom Arceneaux, Allen Babineaux, Paul Tate and others realized that French, the first language of their youth, was being spoken less and less in Louisiana. Okay, they reasoned, let's teach Louisiana kids French in school so the language won't die out. Seems simple enough. Allons-y.

But then things became complicated. Which French do we teach? Standard, academic French, or our own native Louisiana French? Do we really want to speak like, gasp, Cajuns? Aren't Cajuns illiterate in French? And which mother country should we look to for a role model? Quebec, where the language issue is highly politicized? Or maybe France, where we may learn how to appreciate Jean-Paul Sartre and drink Beaujolais in the bargain, too? No, let's relate to Belgium, where French coexists peacefully (most of the time) with Flemish and the language issue is basically moot. But what about Senegal? Louisiana's roots extend there, too.

To further complicate matters, the language issue quickly extended to a larger cultural one. Who's going to be around to play Cajun music once all the oldtimers pass away? Shouldn't we be teaching the accordion as well as "Je suis, tu es, il est..."? Where can I go to hear Cajun music? Let's hurry up and record the real stuff before it all goes Nashville. What is the real stuff? Egad, where did all these tourists come from? Aren't they going to destroy our unique, but oh-so-fragile culture?

Remember the economic carrot that was held out as justification for it all? Louisiana was going to supply ambassadors for the State Department, because we are so good at languages. And Lafayette (it wasn't called Acadia back then) was going to become Louisiana's gateway to international trade, with new markets and new business contacts made possible by our language acquisition?

Ah, those were heady days. Tom Arceneaux designed an Acadian flag. The term "Acadiana" was coined after a typographical error in a letter mailed to Channel 3 turned Acadian Television Corp. into "Acadiana" Television Corp. CODOFIL, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, was established as a state agency with funding from abroad as well. Its founder, James Domengeaux, became known as Le Grand Jimmie on two continents.

French President Valery Giscard d'Estaing swooped into town on a Concorde, no less. A Cajun governor was elected, re-elected and re-elected. The Mardi Gras cranked up in Mamou. And festivals celebrating Cajun culture popped up everywhere. The Acadian Village and its man-made bayou sprouted up on former agricultural land. Where'd all the tourists come from? And why is this reporter shoving a microphone in my face? Gee, we must have something special here.

Yes, there is something going on here, and it has as much to do with what Louisiana is doing with its unique heritage as the fact that it even has one. Because on its own scale, Louisiana's French movement is a bonafide social movement not unlike the Civil Rights movement. The French movement in Louisiana, its own national anthem, its party line, its critics, its policy makers and intellectuals, and its front line troops. It even has a history, one that can be reasonably analyzed for its impact on this region. How has the French movement changed since 1970? What is its success? What are its failures? What is its future?

That the Louisiana French movement was never to become too theoretical, too idealistic is probably best expressed by the current widespread use of the Acadian flag which USL professor Tom Arceneaux designed in 1965, 200 years after the Acadians began arriving in Louisiana. Today, the flag serves as both an historical marker and as identifying logo for purposes both commercial and non-commercial. Does its designer mind? "No," said Arceneaux in a recent interview, "I don't think it's being used too much as a symbol of anything else. You live in Acadiana, or you don't, depending on your level of identification with and consciousness of the French movement.

"Acadiana" has been legislated into our vocabulary as the official designation of the 22-parish region of the Louisiana French triangle, but it has come to mean as much a state of mind as anything else. You live in Acadiana, or you don't, depending on your level of identification with and consciousness of the French movement.

Like all movements, especially at the beginning, this one had its party line. And that party line—that there's nothing dishonorable about speaking French and that Louisiana should become bilingual through the teaching of standard French in Louisiana schools—was largely advanced by the movement's unquestioned leader, Jimmie Domengeaux.

Although Domengeaux would probably eschew the comparison, his one-man leadership has as much to do with the success of the French movement as Martin Luther King's had to do with the black movement in the United States. The French movement in Louisiana is much the product of a one-man leadership (for better and worse) as anything else. There's no doubt that Domengeaux was the right person at the right time for the job.

Domengeaux's personality defined the early French movement. Up per class in his outlook and oriented more towards Paris for his resources than, say, Cajiano, Breaux Bridge or Carencro, Domengeaux was able to move freely in the international diplomatic world that gave its important validation to the whole idea of a second language movement in the United States. (You certainly wouldn't expect New Jersey, for example, to come to Louisiana's aid. Education in foreign languages has never been one of this country's strong points.)

And, as we all know by now, you don't get anything going in Louisiana until your politics are in order. Thanks...