What it means to be Creole

Definitions, expressions vary through time and place

The word “Creole” is all around us. From Creole stuffed bread at Creole Lunch House, to Tony Chachere’s Creole Seasoning, to Festivals Acadiens et Créoles, to pop superstar Beyoncé’s song and video, “Creole.”

But ask 30 people what Creole means and you’ll get 30 different answers. The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture covers all bases when it defines Creole as “anyone who says he is one.”

Derived from the Latin word *creare* (create), Creole holds definitions that vary by time and geography. Many historians point to one of the earliest meanings of Creole as the first generation born in

In their own words

Three people who describe themselves as Creole write about what it means to them. Read their essays on Page 10A.

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the Americas. That includes people of French, Spanish and African descent.

Today, Creole can refer to people and languages in Louisiana, Haiti and other Caribbean Islands, Africa, Brazil, the Indian Ocean and beyond.

In 2015 in Lafayette and the surrounding area, Creole mainly refers to French-speaking African Americans, descendants of slaves and free people of color. These are the creators of zydeco music, who also made important contributions to local cuisine, agriculture and horsemanship.

But John LaFleur II of Washington, who is white and calls himself Creole, contends the definition remains broad. LaFleur is the organizer of the Louisiana Country Creole Families 2015 Bastille Day Commemoration and International Heritage Celebration on Sunday in Ville Platte. LaFleur emphasizes the event is open to people of all skin tones.

"We are of white, yellow, black, brown and red peoples," wrote LaFleur in one of his many essays on the subject. "Creole has always represented our historical and multi-ethnically created and enduring culture which unites all of us to our long history, heritage and the traditions of people for whom neither the color of one's skin or the use of a tomato determined our shared cultural identity. "On est tou Creole." ("We are all Creole.")

Expression and conflict

Ray Brassieur, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, has researched Creole and other cultural subjects for decades. After discovering endless definitions, Brassieur said Creole may be best understood as an individual expression.

"Creole, to a certain extent, is an experience, and then, it's an expression of identity," said Brassieur. "If you want to study that kind of thing, you have to go to an individual and you try to understand what they feel and how they express it. Individuals have different ideas and different experiences about what that is.

"So it's somewhat satisfying, but I believe it to be valid, that we look for those definitions in the opinions, feelings and identity of individuals. It's valid, but it's not satisfying because you never come up with the definition you might be looking for, because they're in conflict or they have different views."

That conflict has been documented in local history.

An article titled "Riot in Louisiana" in the Nov. 4, 1893, edition of the Lafayette Advertiser describes how mobs gathered at train stations in Lake Charles, New Iberia and Lafayette to oppose a touring show called "La Belle Creole Minstrels."

Locals objected to the use of Creole by what the paper described as "a number of octoroons, mulattoes and negroes of both sexes."

A committee, headed by Lafayette's mayor, told the performers they must leave at once.

The paper reported, "The mob collected around the car in which the alleged creoles were, and there were threats to burn it if they did not leave. The manager decided it was best to quit the creole country, and, under this promise, the mob desisted from interference, and the pretended creoles departed North on a fast express. They will never go to Louisiana any more."

Losing language, traditions

The minstrel and mobs are long gone as persons of all shades who identify as Creole are part of the south Louisiana landscape.

But Herb Wiltz, a recently retired educator of 38 years, can't help but wonder how much Creole has been lost in modern society and the local emphasis on Cajun culture.

Wiltz grew up in a Breaux Bridge household in which his French-speaking grandmother learned English through radio and TV. His family spoke Creole with strong elements of French and African languages, a dialect sometimes called kouri vini.

At Vermilionville, Wiltz recently met with visitors from the Pacific Island of Guadaloupe who were interested in hearing Creole language and seeing local traditions. Wiltz said the Guadaloupeans like to eat outside and celebrate in picnic settings.

But he was at a loss to show similar traditions locally.

"Over the years, we have assimilated into modern-day society," said Wiltz. "We don't have those traditional kinds of settings anymore.

"We've lost our language. A lot of our way of cooking has been stolen from us. We lost that because we've never been able to state that we are responsible for the type of cooking. It's evident when we were in homes, taking care of white folks doing the cooking and cleaning. There's a lot that we presented to them, as a result we lost it or gave it away without actually saying this is who we are. This is what we do, especially the spices.

"If you go to France, a lot of their food is bland. There's no seasoning to it. The spices came from a lot of the African traditions that we have. We have not documented a lot of those things."

Working to revive C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc.

To preserve the Creole language and history, Wiltz and other locals are working with C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc., a nonprofit whose acronym stands for Cultural, Resourceful, Educational Opportunities for Linguistic Enrichment.

The preservation group was founded in 1987 and became inactive in the past decade. During its heyday, the organization sponsored a number of community and school activities.

Born a year after the start of Festival International de Louisiane, C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc. worked closely with the event, providing translators and announcers and offering demonstrations on zydeco music and dancing. Middle-school students were sponsored in exchange programs. An annual awards ceremony was held for zydeco musicians.

Wiltz, a past president and vice president of the nonprofit, said many previous members will meet later this month to develop an action plan for community projects, youth outreach and more.

"The members we have now are older members. We need some younger members. We want to get school-age individuals involved.

"We want to provide a forum where we can have the Creole language spoken and document that. It's a dying language. You don't hear it like you used to. But in St. Martin Parish, you will hear Creole being spoken, if you speak to some of the older folks there."

Melvin Ceasar, who is also involved in the C.R.E.O.L.E. Inc. revival, said the organization also will teach that the custom goes beyond language, music and cuisine.

"Creole is a culture," said Ceasar, a French-speaking native of Solieau in Allen Parish. "What I mean by a culture is people that do similar things in similar ways. It's pretty consistent as it comes to food, respect, people and how you act. That's pretty common around Creole people."

"Whatever I do has Creole in it. It's hard not to be Creole when you are. It's all about the attitude and respect. You meet my kids, it's, 'Yes sir,' 'Yes mam.' That's what we raised them to do. It's all about respect."