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## **CODOFIL'S Ally: Local French Teachers in Louisiana**

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CODOFIL's Ally: Local French Teachers in Louisiana

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of History  
University of New Orleans  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
History

By

Natalie Ducote

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This thesis is dedicated to everyone working to keep Louisiana French alive.

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## **Abstract**

In 1968, in the midst of the Civil Rights Era, the Louisiana government created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). During this period of heightened ethnic awareness, CODOFIL aimed to rectify the damage done by prior Louisiana legislation, which prohibited French language on public school grounds. In an effort to revitalize the French language in Louisiana, the organization hired teachers from foreign francophone countries and advocated for a curriculum rooted in Standard French. According to historians, many locals felt Louisiana-specific French dialects were once again rejected. Alongside these foreign teachers were teachers local to Louisiana. Utilizing interviews with Louisiana natives who became French teachers in the state, this paper aims to add to the narrative by presenting their discussion of the topic. The interviews consistently refute claims that local educators were opposed to CODOFIL's hiring of foreign teachers. In addition, the interviews explore the strides these teachers made in revitalizing Louisiana French in spite of CODOFIL's complicated founder, James Domengeaux.

Keywords: Louisiana history; Cajun history; Education; Teachers; Oral History

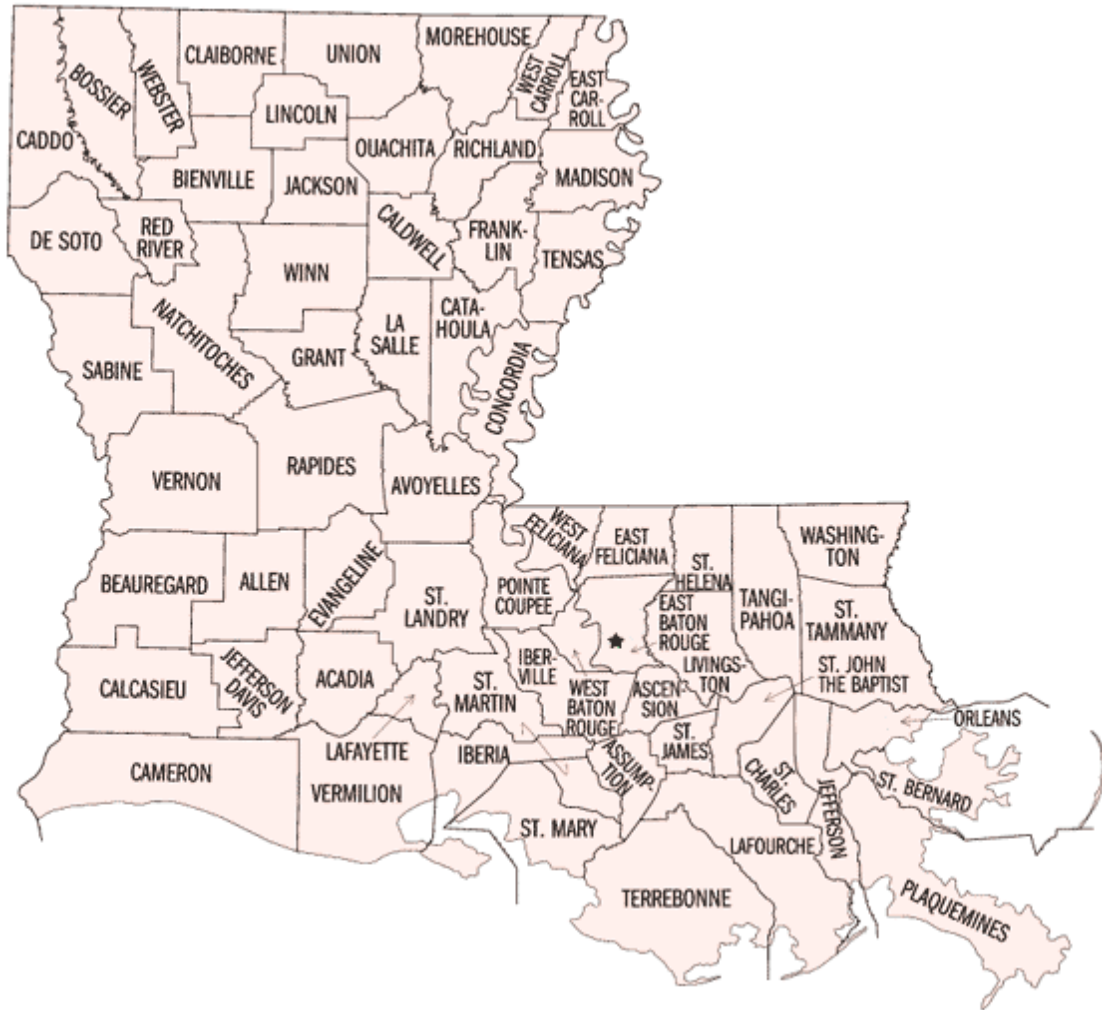


FIGURE 1: Map of Louisiana Parishes.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Louisiana Atlas & Gazetteer* (Yarmouth: Delorme Publishing, 2010). Please reference map to locate parishes mentioned in paper.

## Introduction

Educator Amanda LaFleur recalled the first time she met the founder and first president of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), James Domengeaux, or Jimmy as he was commonly called. Just returning from France in 1979 after completing a French immersion program and earning her masters degree in French, LaFleur visited the CODOFIL offices, in Lafayette Parish, in search of a job. “They knew that I spoke French so they were considering hiring me for a position,” said LaFleur, “So they sent me to talk to Domengeaux.” LaFleur said she and Domengeaux had a very positive conversation and she impressed him with her credentials and teaching experience. “It was all very good,” she said. It was all very good, that is, until the topic of James Donald Faulk’s textbook *Cajun French I* was brought up.<sup>2</sup> “At the very end of the conversation he says ‘Yea like this Faulk thing,’ and he just was super critical of it.” LaFleur expressed to Domengeaux that she could see how Faulk’s book, despite its faults, could be used as a tool in the French classroom. At that moment Domengeaux’s mood quickly changed. “I’m trying to remember how he said it,” says LaFleur smiling, “But I think it was something like ‘Well little girl, I guess you’re just not as smart as I thought you were.’”<sup>3</sup>

LaFleur’s first encounter with the former U.S. Representative and retired attorney revealed Domengeaux’s initial opinion on how French language education in Louisiana should be conducted. Domengeaux believed there was no room for Louisiana varieties of French and was very vocal about this via public disagreements with cultural activists and educators. His idea was to revitalize the French language in Louisiana by regulating French education in school and

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<sup>2</sup> James Donald Faulk, *Cajun French I* (Abbeville: Cajun Press, Inc., 1986), xv. *Cajun French I* was a textbook written by Louisiana teacher James Donald Faulk. According to Faulk, “because Cajun French is not a written language, a phonetic alphabet was devised to teach correct pronunciation. This alphabet was drawn from English sounds to which students have been exposed since they started school.”

<sup>3</sup> Amanda LaFleur, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana, October 24, 2016, all audio files and transcripts in possession of the author unless otherwise stated.



teaching only Standard French in the classroom.<sup>4</sup> However, as Faulk, LaFleur and other teachers suggested, Louisiana varieties of French were vital to CODOFIL's mission and goals and needed to be incorporated. The legislation under which CODOFIL was created allowed the organization to "do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization, and preservation of the French language for cultural, economic, and tourist benefit of the State."<sup>5</sup> However, no clear methodology existed for teaching a largely oral language exposed to centuries of change, especially in a region where students had a fundamental connection to the language they were learning. Though Domengeaux's outlook evolved over time, his focus on reinforcing Louisiana's place in the francophone hindered his ability to see the importance of Louisiana French. LaFleur eventually worked for CODOFIL but she and Domengeaux's first meeting illustrated the conflict that existed between policymakers focused on revitalizing the language by whatever means necessary, and French language educators determining the best methods of teaching French in Louisiana.

Under the 1968 CODOFIL initiative, Local French teachers were tasked with two objectives: to give students the tools necessary to communicate with members of the francophone world, and ignite in them an appreciation of a local culture driven by language. Rather than letting legislation drive curriculum, teachers worked together to write curriculum and make adjustments based on the students they taught. They embraced all perspectives, including Domengeaux's view of Louisiana French. Instead of discrediting colloquial Louisiana language, as per Domengeaux's wishes, they found a way to incorporate Louisiana French into their Standard

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "Standard French" refers to the French language that has a governing body. The Académie Française is France's official authority on the usages, vocabulary, and grammar of the French language.

<sup>5</sup> Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, <http://www.crt.state.la.us/cultural-development/codofil/index>, accessed February 2017.

French curriculum. As a result, lessons varied depending on what region of the state teachers worked.

The francophone region of Louisiana is anything but homogenous consisting of multiple dialects that vary from parish to parish. This diversity is a result of overlapping cultures and languages. Historically, Louisiana's francophone communities have consisted of four primary groups: the Acadians (better known today as the Cajuns) white Creoles, black Creoles and French-Speaking Indians.<sup>6</sup> The Acadians were French Catholics who settled in present-day New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in Canada during the early 18th century. During the Seven Years war in 1755 the British Government forced the Acadians from their home in an event known as the Grand Dérangement, or Great Upheaval. Some Acadians returned to France while others settled along the United States' east coast and in Louisiana. Creole communities in Louisiana are historically comprised of two groups: white creoles who were descendants of the first French and French Canadian colonists and black Creoles whose ancestors' came directly from Africa or the Caribbean. Black creoles include descendants of the slave, free people of color and mixed race populations.

Colonial French is a dialect of French that arrived with French colonists throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Colonial French has been spoken by a wide variety of groups in Louisiana, from free people of color, to plantation owners, to Native American tribes.<sup>7</sup> Native American tribes, particularly the Houma, shifted from their native Houma language to French during the colonial period. Cajun French accompanied the Acadians

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<sup>6</sup> Cécyle Trépanier, "The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity," *The Geographical Journal* 157, no. 2 (1991): 163-164. The term "Creole" evolved in Louisiana. Creole was originally used during the Spanish period to describe anyone who was a direct descendent of the original French and Spanish colonists. To be Creole meant to be born in Louisiana. Both white Creoles and Creoles of color (also known as free people of color) used the term to identify themselves. During the Jim Crow era, white Creoles excluded Creoles of color.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Jean Ancelet, "Negotiating the Mainstream: The Creoles and Cajuns in Louisiana," *The French Review* 80, no. 6: 1237. A large majority of Louisiana's slave population came from the Senegambian region of Africa, and Louisiana Creole arose from their communication with their French-speaking masters.

to Louisiana and all of these groups contributed to the dozens of dialects that exist in Louisiana. As a result, dialect and colloquial terms can differ from parish to parish, although, the majority of the francophone region is located in the southern region of the state.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the influx of immigrant groups and the onset of Americanization following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, French remained a majority language in the majority of Louisiana until the beginning of the twentieth century. As Americanization continued to unfold, U.S. nationalism became synonymous with progress and there was little tolerance for other ideologies. President Theodore Roosevelt famously stated in 1919: “We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language.”<sup>9</sup> Louisiana followed suit and as historian James J. Natsis suggests, Louisiana officials feared bilingualism would hurt the state economically.<sup>10</sup> Thus began the politicking of the French language in Louisiana through the twentieth century.

As Sandra Del Valle explains in *Language Rights and the Law in the United States: Finding Our Voices*, several minority groups were threatened during the early twentieth century. For example, by the end of 1919, thirty-seven states had statutes that restricted the teaching of German specifically or foreign languages generally.<sup>11</sup> According to former CODOFIL President, David Cheramie, Louisiana was included in this group. “There was actually a law [in Louisiana] that was specifically passed that mentioned German language and whether it should be tolerated,” he explained.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the country a general fear of “Hyphenated-Americans,” pervaded society and non-Germans questioned their loyalty. In addition, foreign languages seemed

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<sup>8</sup> Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” 162-163. See Trépanier’s discussion of Louisiana French identity and geography in the article,

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, “America for Americans: Afternoon Speech of Theodore Roosevelt at St. Louis, May 31, 1916,” *The Progressive Party: Its Record From January to July, 1916, Including Statements and Speeches of Theodore Roosevelt*, (HardPress Publishing, 201),

<sup>10</sup> James J. Natsis, “Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana,” *The French Review* 73, no. 2: 326.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Del Valle, *Language Rights and the Law in the United States: Finding Our Voices* (Clevedon: Multilingual Matter, 2003), 33-34.

<sup>12</sup> David Cheramie, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana, January 26, 2017.

predatory to an already vulnerable United States in the early stages of war.<sup>13</sup> As Cheramie explains, the idea became that the United States would not be a polyglot nation and that homogeneity guaranteed a loyal nation. Therefore, regulating the use of foreign languages became the norm and over time the French language in Louisiana lost any legal protections it previously possessed.<sup>14</sup>

Two proceedings acted as what appeared to be a nail in the coffin for French language in Louisiana. In 1916, Louisiana passed the Compulsory Education Act, which required the mandatory school attendance of all children. For many children in rural francophone regions of Louisiana, this now meant being thrust into an English-speaking classroom with little to no prior knowledge of the language. In the same year, the Louisiana State Board of Education began enforcing English as the primary language in the classroom. The state followed suit and in 1921 English became the official language of the public school system. Article XII, Section 12 of the 1921 Louisiana Constitution read: “The general exercises in the public schools shall be conducted in English.”<sup>15</sup> While the law did not technically prohibit French, educators were required to conduct all lessons in English only. As a result, students were punished for speaking French, or any other language in the classroom.<sup>16</sup> French became a language reserved for private and

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<sup>13</sup> Del Valle, *Language Rights and the Law in the United States: Finding Our Voices*, 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* As Sandra Del Valle discusses, the first Louisiana constitution of 1812 required that all laws, public records of the state and judicial and legislative written proceedings be promulgated in French and English. The subsequent constitutions of 1845, 1852 and 1864 contained similar provisions. The first school law of the state was passed in 1847 and did not specifically address the language of the schools, but regulated the relationship between English and French schools. French schools were to be the only public schools of a district and were not considered special schools. The school law of 1870 left the decision about the subjects of instruction to the members of the board. The 1864 constitution required that common schools were to be conducted in English. In 1879, pro-French provisions were re-instated in the constitution, though not as strongly as before. After 1881, there were no more French editions of the state laws.

<sup>15</sup> 1916 Louisiana State Constitution, art.12, sec.12.

<sup>16</sup> Clint Bruce, “Betraying the Betrayed: Towards a Translation of Cajun Poet Jean Arceneaux,” *Equinoxes: A Graduate Journal of French and Francophone Studies*, 2 (2009). Jean Arceneaux’s poem “Schizophrénie linguistique (Linguistic Schizophrenia)” published in his book of poems *Cris sur le Bayou* in 1980 details the frustrations and emotional toll of writing the lines ““I will not speak French on the school grounds,” repeatedly.

personal conversations, and in many cases only among elder generations of the family within the home.

This thesis includes interviews with descendants of these students: Louisianians born in the francophone region between the 1950s and 1960s, who went on to become French educators in Louisiana. These educators witnessed, and contributed to, the transformation of Louisiana French from a language that carried shame to a waning yet essential part of Louisiana culture.<sup>17</sup> They grew up hearing their parents and grandparents speaking French, but many did not gain fluency in the language until college or post-college. Due to the stigma that Louisiana French carried, their parents and grandparents ensured English was their first language. Simultaneously, they grew up during the Civil Rights Era and observed the return to heritage that swept the nation. Historians refer to this as an ethnic revival or a period of neo-ethnicity.<sup>18</sup> They worked in the classroom, far removed from Domengeaux and the politics, to hold onto colloquial language and culture while providing students with a sound knowledge of the French language that would benefit them in any francophone country. This paper presents this situation from the perspective of these teachers.

This thesis examines the following dynamics based on interviews with public school French teachers in Louisiana born in the francophone region of Louisiana: The relationship between foreign CODOFIL and local French teachers, the methods by which teachers incorporated Louisiana French into their Standard French curriculum, the ways in which local teachers worked parallel to CODOFIL, and the influence of neo-ethnicity on these teachers' methodology. Out of what seemed to be a policy argument emerged a working consensus among local French teachers to incorporate Louisiana French into Standard French curriculum. These teachers saw the

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<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this paper, "Louisiana French" refers to any variety of the French language that is spoken in the state including, but not limited to, Cajun, Creole and Colonial French.

<sup>18</sup>Becky Brown, "The Social Consequences of Writing French in Louisiana, *Language in Society* 22, no. 1 (1993), 80.

importance of Louisiana French in CODOFIL's efforts before Domegeaux, and worked parallel to the organization to revitalize the most essential element of Louisiana French heritage.

## Historiography

In the past few decades, historians looked more closely at language as a part of Louisiana French history and worked to debunk misconceptions about the origins and intricacies of the language. Educators are vital to the discussion of language preservation. Although historians thoroughly addressed the conflict that existed around how French should be taught in Louisiana, only moderate attention was given to the relationship between policy-makers and educators, specifically, Louisiana-born educators and how they worked with and around CODOFIL.

The majority of this literature is composed of scholarly articles. Several books exist on the history of the French in Louisiana including *A Great and Noble Scheme: The Tragic Story of the Expulsion of the French Acadians from Their American Homeland*, *Acadian to Cajun: The Transformation of a People*, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century*. However, few address, in detail, the complexities and politics surrounding Louisiana French language. Cajun historian Shane Bernard dedicated a section in his book *Cajuns: The Americanization of a People*, to this discussion. The specific discussion of CODOFIL and its role in Louisiana French is limited to articles.

In the 1981 article “The Louisiana Cajuns: The Quest for Identity through Education,” Joe Green fully credited James Domengeaux with the accomplishments of CODOFIL programs. Green briefly mentioned the efforts of CODOFIL in the classroom by noting the organization’s importation of foreign francophone teachers. However, Green failed to mention the local teachers working alongside and guiding those foreign teachers. The importation of foreign teachers was a consistent topic of conversation in the history of French language education in Louisiana. This frequent discussion may be due to the fact that an alleged resistance existed in the community to

these foreign teachers.<sup>19</sup> Historians recorded this backlash from communities in the face of foreign teachers and the imposition of Standard French. However, the historians failed to note that at the same time these foreign teachers were coming to Louisiana, local teachers were already working on ways to incorporate Louisiana French into the curriculum.<sup>20</sup>

The variety of French incorporated into their curriculum depended on the area of Louisiana they were teaching, as will be discussed later in this paper. Cécyle Trépanier applies a geographical perspective to Louisiana French in the article “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity.” To understand the diversity of the French language in Louisiana, it is important to understand the somewhat erratic pockets of French influence throughout the state. Trépanier identifies the major French subcultures in Louisiana but also their geographical. She argues, “The role and influence of the other French subcultures in defining the character of the region are simply overlooked.”<sup>21</sup> Trépanier concludes, “black Creoles and French-speaking Indians remain unintegrated. Some of the groups which have made French Louisiana unique in North America do not yet have a home in Cajun country.”<sup>22</sup> While Trépanier’s argument may be true in regards to the perception of French Louisiana, this study shows how educators in Louisiana worked to incorporate those subgroups through French language education.

The significance of local teachers in Louisiana French language preservation in the early years of CODOFIL was often clouded by the conflict that surrounded the topic. Barry Jean Ancelet

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<sup>19</sup> Several historians noted this backlash. “Activists on the home front felt that the indigenous language and culture were once again force into the shadows.” Barry Jean Ancelet, “A Perspective on Teaching the ‘Problem Language’ in Louisiana,” *The French Review* 61, no. 3 (1988): 346; “The variety reintroduced in the schools was markedly different from the varieties spoken in the home. This situation had ramifications at the community level. Teachers were brought in from Quebec, Belgium and France and were assigned in rural communities. This state of affairs was met with mixed reactions.” Becky Brown, “The Social Consequences of Writing French in Louisiana,” *Language in Society* 22, no. 1 (1993): 77.

<sup>20</sup> Brown, “The Social Consequences of Teaching French in Louisiana,” 77.

<sup>21</sup> Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” 161.

<sup>22</sup> Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” 170.



was one of the first historians to include local teachers' contributions in his studies.<sup>23</sup> While his research is largely focused on music and folklore, he addressed French language education in his article "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana." "An already murky situation was further complicated by well-meaning but inadequate efforts to introduce Cajun French into the educational system."<sup>24</sup> Ancelet is referring to the Faulk textbook, discussed previously, and Randall Whatley's *Conversational Cajun French I*.<sup>25</sup> As Ancelet discusses, these texts are important to consider because they challenged Domengeaux's understanding of Louisiana French. He also credits artistic contributions by Cajun artists as part of the reason why Domengeaux's perception of Louisiana French eventually shifted.<sup>26</sup> Ancelet argues that in order to regenerate the French language support must come from all levels and focus on all facets of language. The attempts of these educators lack discussion in the historiography of this topic. Due to his proximity to the subject, Ancelet's article could be considered a primary source. "Negotiating the Mainstream: The Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana," was written in 1988, only eight years after Richard Guidry, and ardent supporter of Louisiana French, was hired by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education as supervisor of French instruction.<sup>27</sup>

Written in 2007, Ancelet's article "Negotiating the Mainstream: The Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana," elaborated on his previous research. He identified teachers who "began to seriously explore and develop ways to establish meaningful links between the native Louisiana French-

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<sup>23</sup> See bibliography in, Barry Jean Ancelet, "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana." *The French Review* 61, no. 3 (1988), 356.

<sup>24</sup> Ancelet, "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana," 348.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 348. Ancelet argues that Whatley's book was "uneven and incomplete" because it featured only Whatley's native Avoyelles parish French.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 350.

<sup>27</sup> Barry Jean Ancelet, "Negotiating the Mainstream: The Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana," *The French Review* 80, no. 6 (2007): 1246.

speaking community and the educational system.”<sup>28</sup> The article provided a contemporary overview of Louisiana French language and culture. As a folklorist, Ancelet also focused on language acquisition outside of the classroom via arts and literature, community, and local businesses. He chronicled his involvement in the efforts to revitalize and incorporate Louisiana French into the education curriculum, including his involvement with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette’s Center for Louisiana Studies.

In his 1989 article “Four Hundred Years of Acadian Life,” Carl Brasseaux provided an overview of the Acadian people and works to dispel some common misconceptions about their history and culture. Brasseaux briefly touches on CODOFIL and their supposed unpopular decision to bring in foreign French teachers. As Brasseaux discusses, “Interest in the language, as well as the bilingual programs established after 1968 to perpetuate it, began to wane around 1980, particularly on the grass roots level in response to CODOFIL’s unpopular importation of foreign nationals to teach metropolitan French to Louisiana school children.”<sup>29</sup> Several historians address this “unpopular decision” but very few include the teachers’ perspective on this decision. Similar to Ancelet, Brasseaux refers to a “grass roots level,” but his essay did not clearly define who makes up this grass roots movement.

Michael Picone contributes to the conversation from a linguistic perspective in his 1997 article, “Enclave Dialect Contraction: An External Overview of Louisiana French.” Picone argues that Louisiana French is an enclave dialect at risk in Louisiana.<sup>30</sup> Picone’s article is a linguistic study about dialect endangerment, but he does briefly address the reaction to

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<sup>28</sup> Ancelet, “Negotiating the Mainstream: The Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana,” 1246-1247. Ancelet identifies Amanda LaFleur as one of these teachers. LaFleur was interviewed for this thesis.

<sup>29</sup> Carl Brasseaux, “Four Hundred Years of Acadian Life,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 23 (1989): 3-22.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Picone, “Enclave Dialect Contraction: An External Overview of Louisiana French,” *American Speech* 72, no. 2 (1997): 117. As Picone explains, an enclave dialect is one that is cut off from the source language and finds itself bleaguered by the presence of an altogether different, dominant language. In this case of Louisiana French, the language is cut off from the source language of Standard French and English becomes the dominant language. See Picone’s discussion of enclave dialects.

Domengeaux's proposal of "standard" French in the classroom. He explained, "For those who saw Domengeaux's proposal as yet another assault on regional dialectal French, the initial reaction to this massive campaign to promote standardized instructional French was negative."<sup>31</sup> Picone conducted interviews with subjects in their 30s or 40s whose parents were "French-dominant or balanced-bilingual" and who only used French as a type of "secret language."<sup>32</sup> Written in 1997, Picone interviewed people in the same age group as those interviewed for this thesis, all of whom were in their 50s and 60s. Picone addressed the incorporation of Louisiana French into Standard French curriculum, but only through the lens of foreign teachers. According to Picone, "Imported teachers now undergo initiation into the local dialects of Louisiana and are trained to allow for use of regionalisms when they surface and even to incorporate some elements of regional vocabularies and usage into the curriculum."<sup>33</sup> This incorporation by foreign teachers was the result of the work done by local teachers in the 1970s and early 1980. Picone did not discuss the few local teachers who were making strides early on.<sup>34</sup>

In her 1993 article, "The Social Consequences of Writing Louisiana French," author Becky Brown argued that social change brought about the writing of Louisiana French.<sup>35</sup> According to Brown, from 1973-1993 a Louisiana French literature emerged. Brown focused largely on the writings of the 1980s and observed that a gradual and increased access to literature among Louisiana French speakers resulted in the recovery of a written code and the emergence of a Louisiana French literature scene.<sup>36</sup> Their access to literature recovered a written code and put Louisiana French as equal to other varieties of French. While Brown's focus is on the role of

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<sup>31</sup> Picone, "Enclave Dialect Contraction: An External Overview of Louisiana French," 133.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 133.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, "The Social Consequences of Writing Louisiana French," 70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 80-82.

literature in the establishment of Louisiana French as a written language, beneficial to this discussion is how local teachers incorporated and wrote Louisiana French in the classroom.

Similar to Ancelet, Shane Bernard discussed Richard Guidry's contribution to the incorporation of Louisiana French in classrooms in his book, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*. While Guidry's efforts were huge, he was one of several teachers working on Louisiana French curriculum. Like Picone, Bernard mentioned the orientation program that Guidry provided for incoming foreign assistance teachers. After this orientation, these teachers became assistants to local teachers.

Noted by all of these authors is the backlash to the decision to teach Standard French curriculum in schools. Brown briefly discussed the push to teach, "standard" French in schools and the "ramification at the community level."<sup>37</sup> Brown explained those in favor of standardized French were "lawmakers, searching for a prestigious norm," and those who opposed it were "local community members, learning that their mother tongue is incorrect and inappropriate."<sup>38</sup> While she clearly identified lawmakers as those in favor, she does not specify who constituted local community members. This lack of information may have been due to the fact that it was not necessarily pertinent to her research. She interviewed several informants one of whom asked her 'T'es pas de CODOFIL?' (in the sense 'You aren't one of those CODOFIL teachers, are you?')<sup>39</sup> However, it is unclear whether local teachers were part of this group. One of the goals of this thesis, based on the interviews conducted, is to determine whether local educators were the "local community members," as Brown described.

In his book, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, Shane Bernard dedicates a large portion of two chapters "Cajuns and the 1960s" and "From *Coonass* to *Cajun Power*" to the

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<sup>37</sup> Brown, "The Social Consequences of Writing Louisiana French," 77.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

discussion of CODOFIL, Domengeaux, and the French education debate. Of the authors discussed, Bernard is the only one to identify a particular group of people as expressing resentment toward CODOFIL and Domengeaux. In the chapter, “From Coonass to Cajun Power,” Bernard noted a “growing public resentment, especially among elementary and high school educators, concerning the authority invested in Domengeaux, who had no teaching experience.”<sup>40</sup> While there is no explanation or reference as to the identity of these elementary and high school educators there was at least an acknowledgement that educators were involved in this discussion. Bernard added, “Domengeaux’s reliance on imported teachers, most of whom had no classroom experience, aggravated ill will among local educators. They were also insulted by Domengeaux’s claim that native teachers were inadequate.”<sup>41</sup> Similar to other authors Bernard also argued that the general public was dissatisfied with Domengeaux. None of the authors provided any articles or interviews to support the “locals” and “general public” argument.

In both articles, Ancelet mentions groups of critics and local activists who, for different reasons, opposed CODOFIL’s methods. In “A Perspective on Teaching the ‘Problem’ Language in Louisiana,” Ancelet discusses critics who felt that foreign assistance from francophone countries would be better utilized at the university level to “develop a corps of native Louisiana teachers.”<sup>42</sup> Ancelet gives no mention of these critics’ occupation or role in the community. Similarly in “Negotiating the Mainstream,” Ancelet discusses attitudes surrounding the decision not to teach Cajun French in the classroom. “Activists on the home front felt that indigenous language and culture were once again forced into the shadows as many Cajuns dutifully echoed

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<sup>40</sup> Shane Bernard, *Cajuns: The Americanization of a People* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 99.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard, *Cajuns: The Americanization of a People*, 99.

<sup>42</sup> Ancelet, “A Perspective on Teaching the ‘Problem’ Language in Louisiana,” 346.

past criticisms, apologizing that their language was not ‘the real French.’”<sup>43</sup> While Ancelet thoroughly explains the concerns of these groups, their identity is difficult to discern. He refers to those early opponents to CODOFIL as either “activists” or “critics,” which is a vague term to describe a group of people with such autonomy. There is a general consensus among historians that a general feeling of ill will existed toward CODOFIL because of the insistence on teaching Standard French. These works raise the question: were local educators a part of this group?

Based on the historiography of this topic there is little evidence to suggest that local teachers were a part of the group opposed to the importation of foreign teachers. The oral histories discussed in this thesis will support the argument that Louisiana-born French teachers were willing and, in many cases, excited to work alongside foreign francophone teachers. This thesis follows the arguments made by the historians discussed and elaborates on the contributions made by local French teachers in the classroom. This thesis adds to the ongoing discussion of the importance of French teachers born and raised in Louisiana and their role in the efforts to revitalize Louisiana French. This thesis contributes an evaluation of their professional opinions and participation in the Louisiana French movement. Local teachers are given little attention in this discussion despite the fact that they worked parallel to CODOFIL.

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<sup>43</sup> Ancelet, “Negotiating the Mainstream: The Cajuns and Creoles of Louisiana,” 1242

## **A Shift in the Perception of French and the Creation of CODOFIL**

As early as the late 1930s, efforts began in Louisiana classrooms to reverse the negative effects of the 1921 Constitution.<sup>44</sup> In 1940, teacher Elia Boudreaux wrote an article titled “Some Aims and Methods in Teaching French in the Elementary Schools in Louisiana: The Oakdale Elementary School Experiment.” Although Boudreaux’s methods aligned with those of the genteel Acadians (a focus on Standard French) it was the beginning of a movement among teachers to cultivate pride in Louisiana’s French heritage.

“In our school a period of about 50 minutes is devoted to the study of French every day. That does not mean that French is an isolated subject, forgotten during the other periods. We aim, as much as it is possible, to integrate French with our other subjects.”<sup>45</sup>

Fortunately, this trend continued through the twentieth century. Ancelet credited this “turning of the tide” that persisted through the 1940s with the return of Cajun soldiers from France during World War II and their realization that French could be used as a survival tool. As the French language became more accepted, predecessors to CODOFIL, such as such as the *France-Amerique de la Louisiana Acadienne* (France-America of Acadian Louisiana) formed in 1951, began to form. These organizations, consisting of white Creoles, were typically led by cultural or economic elites in the community. According to Davie Chermie, former director of CODOFIL, these organizations promoted the identity of Longfellow’s *Evangeline* as the pure white Acadian of French ancestry.<sup>46</sup> Chermie suggested that their goal was perhaps to move away from the term “Creole” as it became more associated with and embraced by people of African descent on

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<sup>44</sup> Ancelet, “A Perspective on Teaching the ‘Problem Language’ in Louisiana,” 345.

<sup>45</sup> Elia Boudreaux, “Some Aims and Methods in Teaching French in the Elementary Schools in Louisiana: The Oakdale Elementary School Experiment,” *The Modern Language Journal* 24, no. 6 (1940): 429.

<sup>46</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie* was the tragic story of an Acadian girl and her love Gabriel and their separation during the Grand Dérangement.

the eve of the Civil Rights Era.<sup>47</sup> These elites also promoted a standard variety of French in schools. As a result, over time the term “Cajun” became a term that whites of Louisiana French ancestry could cling to, rather than the more racially ambiguous term, “Creole.”<sup>48</sup> Cheramie suggested that the white French-speaking population identified with the story of the Acadians, no matter their lineage.<sup>49</sup>

Domengeaux’s background aligned with his predecessors.<sup>50</sup> Born in 1907 to a wealthy family in Lafayette Louisiana, Domengeaux’s experiences were different than those of children attending public school at the time. Although he was educated in the wake of the 1921 Louisiana Constitution that enforced the use of English only in classrooms, he attended both private elementary and high schools. More than likely, Domengeaux never experienced physical punishment for speaking French in school.<sup>51</sup> Historians often refer to Domengeaux as a genteel Acadian despite the fact that he was a non-Acadian of upper class white French Louisiana ancestry.<sup>52</sup> His life experiences differed greatly from those of farming and shrimping families in rural areas. David Cheramie, President of CODOFIL from 1998-2011, explained that the former politician could not fathom the idea that the way Cajun farmers and shrimpers spoke would be acceptable in Paris. A lawyer by trade with a career in politics and brief military service,

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<sup>47</sup> David Cheramie, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, LA, January 26, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” 161.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with David Cheramie. It is important to note that many of these elite genteel Acadians were of Acadian descent.

<sup>50</sup> Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, 91. Shane Bernard refers to Domengeaux as a “genteel” Acadian. “Genteel” Acadians were considered more refined and typically of a higher social status. Rocky L. Sexton also uses this term; Rocky L. Sexton, “Cajun or Coonass? Exploring Ethnic Labels in French Louisiana Regional Discourse,” *Ethnology* 48, no. 4 (2009): 277.

<sup>51</sup> Jo-Lynda Hunter Strandberg, “The Lived Experiences of Native Louisiana French Speakers in Lower Bayou Lafourche Entering English-Only Elementary Schools,” PhD diss., Liberty University, 2013, 129. This notion aligns with a study done by Jo-Lynda Hunter Strandberg. In her work, Strandberg interviewed eight people who attended English only elementary schools as native Louisiana French speakers. According to her findings, the only student who did not receive punishment for speaking French on the schoolground was the person who attended a Catholic school. Private schools were afforded autonomy in regards to language.

<sup>52</sup> Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” 167. Cécyle Trépanier explains that two types of Cajuns came to be recognized: the “real” or “pure” Cajuns, of Acadian descent, and the “new” Cajun, that is any white Louisiana native of French culture.



Domengeaux's identity dictated his policies and beliefs. "His goal was global," said Chéramie, "to create Louisianans who could sit on the Académie Française."<sup>53</sup> Domengeaux soon found an avenue for his vision.

A celebration of Louisiana French heritage, albeit focused on the "Cajun" identity, evolved through the neo-ethnic movement of the 1960s. In the midst of this social climate, Louisiana Governor John McKeithen passed a bill to authorize the establishment of Council for the Development of French in Louisiana in 1968. The original name, the Council for the Development of Louisiana's French Heritage, indicated that the initial focus of the organization was wider than language preservation.<sup>54</sup> Heavily involved in the passage of the bill, Domengeaux was immediately appointed as chairman of the CODOFIL board.

One month after the creation of CODOFIL, an August 30, 1968 article titled "Gov. McKeithen Wants Teacher to Head Group," was published in the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*. The article featured a letter written by Governor McKeithen to the president of the University of Winnipeg requesting the release of Professor Raymond S. Rogers to serve as executive director of CODOFIL. A British-born American educator, Rogers spent most of his adult life in Canada.<sup>55</sup> According to Ancelet, Rogers was heavily involved in the development stages of CODOFIL.<sup>56</sup> The article notes Rogers's service on the Louisiana Tourist Development Commission in addition to "the chairman of the council's strong desire that Dr. Rogers become the executive director."<sup>57</sup> The chairman, of course, was Jimmy Domengeaux. Domengeaux's recommendation of Rogers for the position was met with criticism.

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<sup>53</sup> David Chéramie, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, LA, January 26, 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Roger K. Ward "The French Language in Louisiana Law and Legal Education: A Requiem," *Louisiana Law Review* 57, no. 4 (1997): 1299-1300.

<sup>55</sup> "Gov. McKeithen Wants Teacher to Head Group," *Baton Rouge Advocate*, August 30, 1968, 4-A.

<sup>56</sup> Ancelet, "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana," 355.

<sup>57</sup> "Gov. McKeithen Wants Teacher to Head Group," 4-A.

Despite Rogers's qualifications for the position and enthusiasm for Louisiana, members of the Lafayette Parish School Board did not approve. During a September 18, 1968 Lafayette Parish School Board meeting, a motion was passed by school board members Maxie Broussard and Donald Romero that the Board adopt a resolution appointing a Louisiana man to the directorship of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana.<sup>58</sup> Later, in the same meeting, a representative for The French Heritage Committee of the Lafayette Parish School Board made a statement noting the committee's awareness of the article that appeared in the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate* citing McKeithen's recommendation.<sup>59</sup> The criticism of Rogers was rooted in his identity as a non-native Louisianan.<sup>60</sup> These meeting records helped to identify the community members opposed to Domengeaux's desire to bring in teachers and professionals from outside of Louisiana. The records also indicate that locals clashed with Domengeaux's methods from the inception of CODOFIL. Still, these locals were members of the school board and not necessarily educators.

As part of its international effort, CODOFIL also hired teachers from foreign francophone countries including Belgium, France and Canada. The first group of teachers arrived from France in Louisiana in September 1970.<sup>61</sup> Several historians note Domengeaux's conviction that local teachers were not qualified to teach French. Domengeaux was not willing to wait to train locals

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<sup>58</sup> Minutes of the Lafayette Parish School Board Meeting, Lafayette Parish School Board, September 18, 1968, (Book 21: Jan. 24, 1968-Oct. 11, 1968): 244-246.

<sup>59</sup> Bernard, *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, 86-89.

<sup>60</sup> Minutes from LPSB Meeting, September 18, 1968, 245. The French Heritage Committee was a subset of the Lafayette Parish School Board.

<sup>61</sup> "French Tutors Arrive in State: New Renaissance Seen by Domengeaux," *The Times-Picayune*, Sept. 19, 1970, Sec. 3, pg. 7.

to do the job.<sup>62</sup> Cheramie said, “He didn’t consider any Louisianian capable of being able to speak, or to teach proper French.”<sup>63</sup>

Domegneaux did not believe that Louisianians were capable of teaching French. According to Gerald Gold’s article, “The Cajun French Debate in Louisiana,” CODOFIL worked under the assumption that native speakers of French would not need training to teach French. The catch was that Domengeaux did not consider Louisiana French to be legitimate. Their solution was the importation of up to 400 foreign French teachers.

The hiring of foreign teachers was not an affront to local teachers but a measure to insure that students were receiving the best education, according to Carol Campbell. “They [some local French teachers] had maybe one semester or two semesters of French and you know you don’t learn a language in one semester or two.”<sup>64</sup> She recalled posters on the classroom doors of French teachers with phrases that were spelled completely wrong. Her biggest concern being that students were receiving the wrong information.

The eighty-one-year-old retired teacher, originally from Moncla, Louisiana in Avoyelles Parish, taught school in both Avoyelles and Plaquemines Parish. Campbell attended Louisiana College in Pineville and received her Master’s Degree from Michigan State in education. From there she moved to Denver to teach, where she met her husband. Her husband’s job moved them around the world, and they landed in Belgium for a period of time. In Belgium, Campbell began taking French classes at night. She eventually earned her degree in French at a university in Belgium and in 1984 moved back to Moncla to teach French. Campbell took years of French

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<sup>62</sup> James J. Natsis, “Legislation and Language: The Politics of Speaking French in Louisiana,” *The French Review* 73, no. 2 (1999): 327; Ancelet, “A Perspective on Teaching the ‘Problem Language,’ in Louisiana,” 346; Bernard, *Cajuns: The Americanization of a People*, 93.

<sup>63</sup> David Cheramie, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, LA, January 26, 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Carol Campbell, interview by Natalie Ducote, Moncla, Louisiana October 3, 2016, all audio files and transcripts in possession of the author unless otherwise stated.

language classes during her career and participated in an immersion program in Poitiers, France. She believed the proficiency she gained in the French language was absolutely necessary in order to teach. She saw a lack of that proficiency among some of her colleagues.

Retired French teacher Ken Douet echoed the concerns of Campbell. Given that CODOFIL was a statewide program, his apprehension was the potential lack of local French teachers available in the northern part of the state.<sup>65</sup> Overall, Douet agreed CODOFIL answered the need for teachers. Whether or not there was a realistic shortage in the northern part of the state, the number of teachers exposed to the French language in northern Louisiana was fewer than that of southern Louisiana. According to Boudreaux, in 1940 of the 13,210 schoolteachers in Louisiana only 179 of those taught French.<sup>66</sup> This trend continued as French education became less common. Despite negative feedback, Domengeaux's efforts to create more qualified teachers in Louisiana were not totally misplaced.

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<sup>65</sup> Ken Douet, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana, July, 19, 2016, all audio files and transcripts in possession of the author unless otherwise stated; Barry Jean Ancelet, "A Perspective on Teaching the 'Problem Language' in Louisiana," 346. The Second Language Specialist program, for example, was eventually dismantled because of the state-wide scope of CODOFIL. The program was originally designed to re-gear native Louisiana French speaking teachers to enable them to teach in French the subjects they had taught for years in English. In South Louisiana, this was possible with a relatively short period of intensive preparation. However, when the program was demanded in predominantly Anglophone North Louisiana as well, it was necessarily doomed to failure;

<sup>66</sup> Elia Boudreaux, "Some Aims and Methods in Teaching French in the Elementary Schools in Louisiana" *The Modern Language Journal*, 24, no. 6 (1940): 427- 430.

## The Neo-Ethnic Movement and Language Legislation

CODOFIL was not revolutionary in its attempt to revitalize a minority language. The Civil Rights Movement set the stage for a nationwide analysis of equal opportunity within education. The Bilingual Education Act (BEA), Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1968, was the first piece of United States federal legislation that recognized the needs of Limited English Speaking Ability (LESA) students.<sup>67</sup> Under Title VII, parish school districts in Louisiana applied for and received grants for federal bilingual programs. As Amanda LaFleur explained, the program intended to support immigrant children or children who spoke a foreign language. The idea being these students received lessons in both English and their home language. Under Title VII, several parishes in Louisiana, including St. Landry and St. Martin, applied for these grants under the premise that Louisiana children, because they grew up among people who spoke French, held a disadvantage. The legislation was revised to apply only to non-English-speaking students but for a period of time the federal bilingual program worked parallel to CODOFIL to accomplish a similar goal.<sup>68</sup>

One of these Title VII teachers was Sandra LaBry. She began teaching in English in 1973 in St. Landry Parish and in 1974, through the federal bilingual program. She created curriculum, and reinforced that curriculum to her classes in French. St. Martin Parish also received a grant through the federal bilingual program, which is where Ken Douet honed his skills. Because of the work done by teachers like LaBry and Douet, a greater need developed for French teachers.

“There were not many local teachers doing this kind of work, which is why foreign assistance

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<sup>67</sup> Goria Stewner-Manzanares, “The Bilingual Education Act: Twenty Years Later,” *New Focus, Occasional Papers in Bilingual Education*, no. 6 (1988): 1, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED337031.pdf>.

<sup>68</sup> Gerald Gold, “The Cajun French in Louisiana,” *Issues in International Bilingual Education: The Role of the Vernacular*, ed. Beverly Hartford and Albert Valdman (New York: Plenum Press, 1982): 228. Gold and other historians address the fact that the discussion of Federal Title VII gets lost in the discussion of CODOFIL and French language education in Louisiana.

teachers were hired through CODOFIL,” said LaBry who explained that the need to bring in foreign assistance was a compliment.

Both LaBry and Douet identified as Cajun and cite their early exposure to French as influencing their career choice. LaBry attended the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette (now known as the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.) There she majored in English and minored in French. Douet was born in St. Martin Parish and also attended USL but, his major was French and his minor was English.<sup>69</sup> LaBry began teaching in 1973 in St. Landry Parish and Douet in 1972 in St. Martin Parish in the midst of integration and evolving legislation. Lessons included cultural sensitization to encourage students to be welcoming to not only black children but also foreign teachers who spoke differently. LaBry and Douet were challenged by all of these changes but said these practices made it easier reinvigorate interest in local culture and language.

During this time the number of Louisiana teachers who became certified Second Language Specialists (SLS) increased. For example, Carol Campbell became a certified Second Language Specialist in 1984.<sup>70</sup> One of CODOFIL’s goals was to increase the number of Second Language Specialists in Louisiana. To do this the organization offered scholarships and programs to local teachers. Figure 2 displays the shift in the number of Foreign Associate Teachers compared to Second Language Specialists over a thirty-six-year period.

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<sup>69</sup> Sandra LaBry, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana, July 19, 2016.

<sup>70</sup> An SLS certification gave teachers the authority to teach French in both elementary and secondary settings.

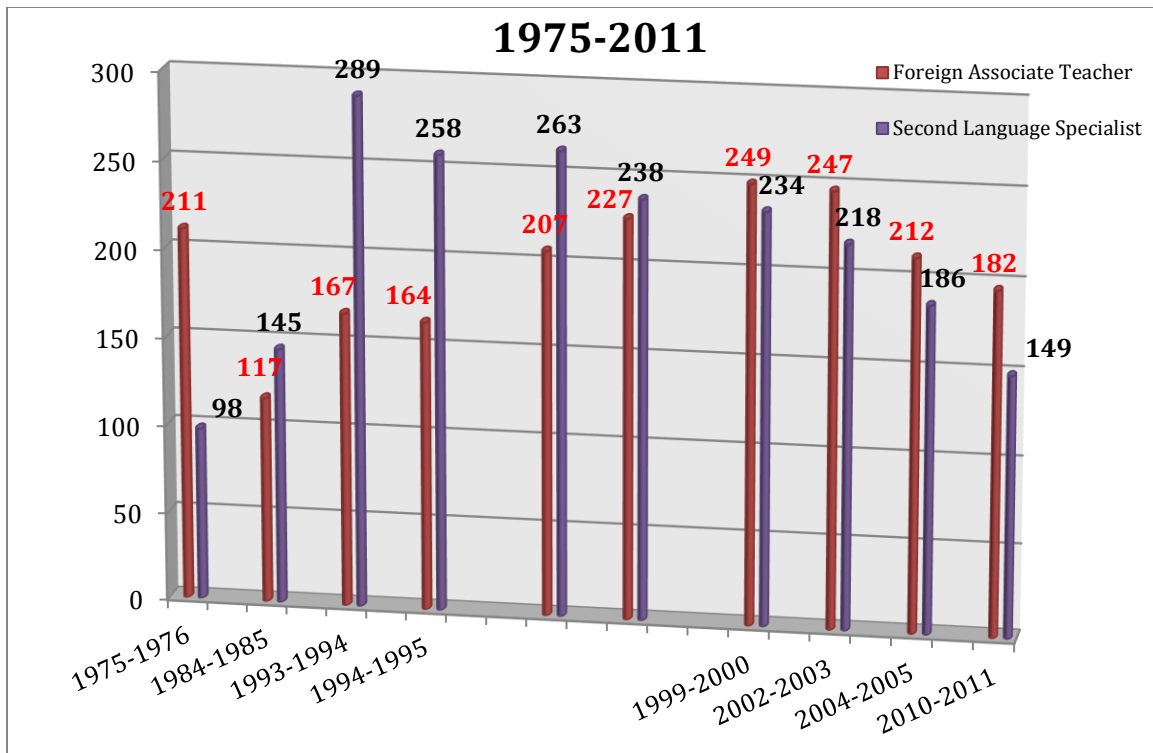


FIGURE 2: Number of Foreign Assistance Teachers (FAT) compared to Second Language Specialists (SLS) in Louisiana between 1975 and 2011. Graph courtesy of CODOFIL.

Based on the author’s interviews, no evidence suggested that local teachers held animosity toward the Foreign Assistance Teachers. For Campbell and LaFleur, CODOFIL teachers were assets in the classroom. “There was a CODOFIL teacher in my kindergarten classroom and we learned so much from each other,” said Campbell. Campbell says that in her experiences there was no resentment among local teachers in response to the foreign Francophone teachers. “Perhaps,” she added, “those who were upset about the hiring of these teachers were those who were not qualified to teach French.” Campbell explained that a number of local teachers taught French without a Second Language Specialist certification. “This did more harm than good because students are learning incorrectly,” said Campbell.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Carol Campbell, interview by Natalie Ducote, Moncla, Louisiana October 3, 2016, audio files and transcriptions in possession of the author.

According to Campbell, the certified, foreign teachers taught students the French language and about other variations of French culture and dialect. “The students were not the only ones learning,” said Campbell as the CODOFIL and local teachers discussed the differences in the French they heard growing up. “It was very interesting to learn from them and they appreciated learning from us. They could bring their knowledge back,” she added.<sup>72</sup> LaFleur explained that in her experiences CODOFIL recruited foreign teachers who were open and excited about incorporating Louisiana French into their curriculum. LaBry and Douet both felt the Foreign Assistant Teachers were a tremendous help in the classroom. They remembered several teachers who moved back to Louisiana after their assignments were complete because they forged such a connection with the culture. As a result of Title VII, these teachers were some of the first local teachers to incorporate Louisiana French into a Standard French curriculum. Local teachers did so without interference from CODOFIL.

The language legislation in the latter half of the twentieth century provided these educators with the opportunity to teach Louisiana French in a new way. “There was an authenticity about what was happening in French education. Using people like us, local teachers, we were willing to embrace the culture and the language,” said LaBry. This authenticity in the Louisiana French movement and the early years of these local teachers’ careers connected with what historian Shane Bernard described as the new “Age of Ethnicity.”<sup>73</sup> He referred to the boom in Cajun pride in the 1970s as an overdue response to the pressure imposed on Cajuns to conform to Anglo-American standards. James Dormon referred to the “collective roar of ethnic populations in the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Bernard, *Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, 87.



United States in the mid-1970s” as ‘neo-ethnicity.’”<sup>74</sup> As Bernard explained, this focus on heritage became a theme for minorities across the country. He argued that the “colliding in the mid-1970s, the grassroots movement emerged triumphant. Ordinary Cajuns reevaluated their image as a people and proudly embraced their heritage.”<sup>75</sup>

In the middle of this movement were young Louisiana teachers, such as LaFleur, Douet, LaBry and Campbell, all of whom were born into homes where French was present but not necessarily imparted. As a result of the English-only rule in public schools, the first half of the twentieth century produced a generation of culturally French people with little more than passing competence in French.<sup>76</sup> LaFleur grew up in Ville Platte in Evangeline Parish. She attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where she earned a degree in French. Still feeling that she was not proficient in the language, she attended a French immersion course of study in France through Middlebury College where she earned a Master’s Degree in French.<sup>77</sup>

LaBry’s story is similar. Originally from St. Landry Parish, she recalled her grandparents’ native language as French and her mother’s ability to speak French after studying the language in college. Conversely, her father was a farmer and his education was limited to the eighth grade. His ancestors were Acadians from Nova Scotia and his first language was French. She described the language in her home as “English smattered with French words.”<sup>78</sup> Her colleague Ken Douet had a slightly different experience. He grew up speaking French at an early age in the home.

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<sup>74</sup> James Dormon, “Ethnicity in Contemporary America,” *Journal of American Studies* 15, no. 3 (1981): 325. James Dormon argues that the “Age of Ethnicity” was an idea proposed by Theodore Hershberg in 1973 that ethnic groups were free to celebrate their origins and culture as part of their American right.

<sup>75</sup> Bernard, *Cajuns: The Americanization of a People*, 88. Bernard uses the term “ordinary Cajun” as a blanket term to describe those involved in the Louisiana French preservation movement who were not of an elite or genteel status.

<sup>76</sup> Brown, “The Social Consequences of Writing Louisiana French,” 71.

<sup>77</sup> In addition to her years as an educator, LaFleur became influential in preserving Louisiana French. She worked alongside Barry Jeand Ancelet, Richard Guidry and others as an assistant editor of the *Dictionary of Louisiana French: As Spoken in Cajun, Creole, and American Indian Communities* published in 2010.

<sup>78</sup> Sandra LaBry, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana, July 19, 2016.

These subjects recalled their parents' experiences in the Louisiana school system during the 1920s and 1930s when English was strictly enforced on school campuses and speaking French was, in some instances, a punishable offense. Though familiar and sympathetic with the complicated history of Louisiana French, their relationship with the language was more positive than their parents and grandparents. Conversely, Domengeaux observed the negative consequences of speaking Louisiana French. The decades that separated these teachers from Domengeaux greatly affected their difference in opinions. At the time of LaFleur and Domengeaux's first meeting, she was twenty-two and Domengeaux was in his early seventies. Although Domengeaux's attitude regarding Louisiana French evolved, he never accepted the legitimacy of Louisiana French to the degree of his young colleagues.

## Observations from the Field: Approaches to Teaching Louisiana French

As to why Domengeaux was initially so insistent on promoting standardized French, opinions differed. According to LaFleur, “he could not gauge the level of fluency of the most fluent French speakers in Louisiana,” which contributed to his desire to hire foreign teachers. In his mind, “proper” French was associated with France. His lack of linguistic knowledge did not allow him to understand dialects and the variations of French that existed in Paris, Canada or Africa. “Part of it was just his own ignorance, and I don’t mean that in an ugly way, it was just really not knowing,” said LaFleur.<sup>79</sup>

Domengeaux’s lack of understanding of language coupled with his stern personality resulted in disagreements. On April 6, 1978 in an article in the *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate* James Domengeaux, founder of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), was accused of equating Cajun French to “redneck English,” and “chicken scratch.”<sup>80</sup> The article titled, “‘French’ Battle Lines Beginning to Develop,” discusses the disagreement between Domengeaux and James Faulk. According to the article, Faulk’s textbook *Cajun French I* was under evaluation by a textbook committee for potential use in state high schools. Faulk believed his methodology, using English phonetics to write Cajun French, allowed students who were not familiar with the French language to become easily introduced to the language.<sup>81</sup> “He can still teach his Standard French,” says Faulk, “You and I know that a Cajun student would rather take Cajun French than Canadian French or French and that’s what is he afraid of. I’m sure,” he

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<sup>79</sup> Amanda LaFleur interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, October 24, 2016, audio files and transcripts in possession of the author; Bernard, *Cajuns: The Americanization of a People*, 126. Bernard argues that Domengeaux ultimately hated Cajun French, which is why he took so many steps toward recruiting and training Standard French teacher.

<sup>80</sup> United Press International, “‘French’ Battle Lines Beginning to Form,” *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, April 6, 1979.

<sup>81</sup> Faulk’s textbook used English phonetics to spell Louisiana French words making it possible for students with no background in French to read the book.

adds.<sup>82</sup> Domengeaux was pitted against Faulk and, as a result, the public perceived him as “anti-Cajun.”

PHONETIC SYMBOLS USED IN THIS COURSE

VOWEL SOUNDS

ah - like <u>a</u> in <u>palm</u> .	o - as in <u>so</u> .
ah̄n̄ - like <u>on</u> in <u>con</u> , but <u>n</u> is silent.	oo - as in <u>moon</u> .
aw - as in <u>law</u> .	oñ - as in <u>lone</u> , but <u>n</u> is silent.
a - as in <u>at</u> .	uh - close to <u>o</u> in <u>of</u> .
ā - as in <u>late</u> .	uh̄n̄ - close to <u>one</u> in <u>done</u> , but <u>n</u> is silent.
añ - as in <u>can</u> , but <u>n</u> is silent.	∅ - no equivalent in English. Best obtained from tapes.
ee - as in <u>see</u> .	u - no equivalent in English. Best obtained from tapes.
e - as in <u>let</u> .	
i - as in <u>it</u> .	

CONSONANTS

b - as in <u>boy</u> .	om - as in <u>dome</u> .
ch - as in <u>church</u> .	on - as in <u>lone</u> .
d - as in <u>dog</u> .	p - as in <u>pen</u> .
f - as in <u>fat</u> .	r - as in <u>run</u> , but <u>r</u> is trilled on the end of the tongue.
g - as in <u>girl</u> .	s - as in <u>see</u> .
h - as in <u>hot</u> .	sh - as in <u>she</u> .
j - like <u>su</u> in <u>measure</u> .	t - as in <u>toy</u> .
j̄ - as in <u>just</u> .	uhn - close to <u>one</u> in <u>done</u> .
k - as in <u>kiss</u> .	v - as in <u>vent</u> .
l - as in <u>like</u> .	w - as in <u>we</u> .
m - as in <u>man</u> .	y - as in <u>yes</u> .
n - as in <u>not</u> .	z - as in <u>zoo</u> .
ng - as in <u>song</u> .	

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FIGURE 3. Excerpt from Faulk’s book Cajun French I. Faulk used English phonetics to explain pronunciation of vowel and consonant sounds in Cajun French.

<sup>82</sup> United Press International, “‘French’ Battle Lines Beginning to Form,” *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, April 6, 1979.

<u>USEFUL EXPRESSIONS</u>	
Good morning	
Good afternoon	Boñ joor
Good evening	
Good night (when leaving)	Boñ swahr
Sir, mister	Mø see-ø
Madam, Mrs.	Mah dahm
Miss	Mahm zel
How are you? (How is it going?)	Koñ moñ sah vaw?
Things are going well.	Sah vaw (bee-añ)
And with you?	Ā ah vek two?
Things are going badly.	Sah vaw mahl.
I'm sorry.	Sahm fe d'lah pan.
Excuse me.	Āks kuz mwo.
Please.	See voo ple.
Thank you.	Mar see.
You're welcome.	Pawd kwo.
Good luck!	Bon shoñs!
Where, where is, where are?	Ā yoo?
When, when is, when are?	Ā koñ?
Why?	Poor kwo?
Because.	Pahrs kø.
Where are you (sing.) going?	Ā yoo t'ā pahr tee?
I'm going...	Sh-su pahr tee...
to school	ah l'ā kawl
to town	o vee lahj
to the store	o mah gah zañ

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FIGURE 4. Excerpt from Faulk’s textbook Cajun French I. On this page he used sounds and words in the English language to explain the pronunciation of common phrases in Cajun French. While these phrases are similar to Standard French, the pronunciation is slightly different.

The irony of the situation is that Domengeaux did not speak Standard French. “He spoke the chicken scratch,” laughed Douet. LaFleur and LaBry both considered Domengeaux’s French to be a Creole-Cajunized dialect.<sup>83</sup> Domengeaux’s insistence on teaching international French while simultaneously promoting the preservation of Cajun culture and traditions depicted just

<sup>83</sup> Amanda LaFleur interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana October 24, 2016, audio files and transcripts in possession of the author.

how little he understood language. “He tried to gentrify the language,” explained Cheramie. In his attempts to elevate the perception of his heritage, he disregarded a pivotal component.

The problems with Faulk’s book did not lie in his intentions but rather in his limited representation of Louisiana French. The book’s narrow scope limited its role in the grand scheme of Louisiana French education. Faulk’s book only covered the dialect of his native Vermillion Parish. As several historians addressed, the twenty-two-parish Acadiana region does not represent the entirety of the Louisiana francophone region, but merely the largest concentration of Cajun French speakers. However, as Trépanier addressed, Acadiana is often used to represent all of French Louisiana. As Faulk noted in the introduction of *Cajun French I*, “[Standard French] did not provide the present needs for communication among the French-speaking natives of Southwest Louisiana.”<sup>84</sup> Faulk’s book may have provided a small number of students in Vermillion Parish the ability to communicate with their Cajun French grandparents, but it was not useful to other students around the state whose families spoke different dialects.

The dialects of Louisiana vary from parish to parish, and include Creole, Colonial, African, Native American and other varieties of French. As Barry Jean Ancelet discussed, three main sources of French language in Louisiana include: the colonial French that developed among the descendants of the French who first began to settle Louisiana in 1699, the Creole that developed among the descendants of the African slaves brought to work on the French colonial plantations, and the Cajun French that evolved among the descendants of Acadians who began to arrive in Louisiana in 1765 after they were exiled from their homeland in what is now Nova Scotia.<sup>85</sup> The immigration of other groups, including Germans, resulted in a modern version of these dialects

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<sup>84</sup> Faulk, *Cajun French I*, xvii.

<sup>85</sup> Ancelet, “Negotiating the Mainstream: The Creoles and Cajuns of Louisiana,” 1237.

and many Louisiana French speakers switch between dialects, sometimes without knowledge of doing so.

Personal identity, however, does not necessarily dictate what variety of Louisiana French is spoken. For example, groups who identify as Cajuns may sometimes speak Creole and vice versa. Ancelet added that it would be an injustice to think of South Louisiana as a homogenous region in terms of the French language.<sup>86</sup>

Campbell strongly considered ancestry when discussing varieties of French in Louisiana. Campbell iterated background when discussing her father who was born in Moncla, Louisiana in Avoyelles Parish. When asked to identify what dialect of French her father spoke she identified his dialect as Colonial French due to the fact that it was very close, in her opinion, to Standard French. She laughs when she recalled her father discussing neighbors who lived across the Red River. “To him they were Americans. He referred to them as ‘les Américains,’ but he was French.” Avoyelles Parish is referred to as the “Cajun Crossroads” due to its largely European immigrant history combined with the influence of Cajun culture in the region. It is the northern most parish of the Acadiana region.<sup>87</sup>

Campbell explained that her ancestors were French and that is how her father identified. He never referred to himself as Cajun. “When I came back to the United States (after living overseas for a few years), I taught French in the same parish where my father was punished every time he

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<sup>86</sup> Ancelet, “Negotiating the Mainstream: The Creoles and Cajuns of Louisiana,” 1237. “Cajuns along the Bayou Teche are as likely to speak Creole as their black Creole neighbors, while black Creoles living out on the southwestern prairies tend to speak what amounts to modern Cajun French.”

<sup>87</sup> The Cajun community was created through the expulsion of the Acadians from Acadia (present-day Canadian maritime provinces) to Louisiana in 1755. The French-speaking Acadians settled in Louisiana and became Cajuns (the Anglicized form of Acadians) through a series of cultural exchanges with various other groups in Louisiana. Although Cajuns are strictly defined as the descendants of these Acadian ancestors, the term is often widely applied to include anyone born and raised in the modern-day Cajun communities in Southwest Louisiana. For further discussion of dialects in northern Acadiana see Aaron Emmitte, “Un Cadjin qui dzit cher bon Dieu!: Assibilation and Affrication in Three Generations of Cajun Male Speakers,” PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2013.

said a French word at school,” said Campbell. Her story shed light on the fact that all children who spoke Louisiana French, not just Cajun French varieties, were subject to punishment. This is part of the reason she constantly reminded students in her classroom of their heritage.

Lineage and identity were tools Campbell used in her classroom when teaching in Avoyelles at Hessmer Elementary School and Marksville High School. She explained that many of her students branded the French their grandparents spoke as Cajun French. According to Campbell, while she knew the language to which her students referred to be influenced by Cajun French she reminded the students of their family names. “I would say ‘You’re not Cajun. Cajuns are Acadians but your family came directly from France.’ They would say, ‘Well my mom always said I was Cajun.’”<sup>88</sup> Campbell reinforced Trépanier’s argument that all Louisiana French is lumped under the Cajun French category.<sup>89</sup> As a result of her global experiences, her focus tended to be on Standard French. Her goal being that her students would have the ability to communicate with French speakers around the world.

Over-simplifying the French language of Louisiana is easy due to the fact that dialect as well as identity often overlap from region to region. Douet, LaFleur and LaBry recalled slight variations that exist from family to family. “We spoke pretty Standard Louisiana French with some Louisiana Creole,” said Douet, despite the fact that he earlier identified as Cajun.<sup>90</sup> LaBry agreed saying, “In St. Martin Parish, with the family, you would use Creole language that would not be appropriate if you were in town in St. Martinville.” For example, according to Douet,

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<sup>88</sup> Carol Campbell, interview by Natalie Ducote, Moncla, LA October 3, 2016,.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Douet, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, LA, July 19, 2016. When Douet refers to “Standard Louisiana French” he is referring to a dialect of Louisiana French that is spoken and understood throughout a majority of parishes in Louisiana. However, there is no governing body that dictates aspects of the language as is present in Standard French in France. Whether there is a “standard” variety of Louisiana French is difficult to discern. What LaBry and Douet are suggesting is that most Louisiana French speakers are able to communicate with each other in Louisiana French, despite a difference in dialects. Similarly, they explained English speakers in the United States are able to communicate with English speakers in the United Kingdom despite difference in tone, dialect, terminology, etc.



*“T’es okay pour courir à magasin aujourd’hui?”* translated from Creole is “You have to go to the store today?” In Standard French the same phrase would be *“Tu veux aller au magasin?”* Both Douet and LaBry agreed that if they would converse with family members from other parishes both participants in the conversation would revert to Standard Louisiana French to communicate.

Trépanier argued that CODOFIL and Domengeaux used the term “Cajun” as a label in their efforts to create a sense of unity and gain supporters. “Cajun” was a term that Louisianians recognized and could cling to. However, as Trepanier noted, the area is “ethnically diversified and compartmentalized geographically.” Domengeaux also complicated the situation by encouraging people to embrace Cajun culture and heritage but dismiss the language.<sup>91</sup>

As LaFleur explained, Domengeaux did not understand that Louisiana French was not “bad French.” His fear was that teaching “bad French” (Louisiana French) would not equate to successful French acquisition among students. Louisiana varieties of French had long been stigmatized which, according to local teachers, made it difficult for Domengeaux to understand its place in French language curriculum at first.<sup>92</sup>

Campbell and LaFleur both cite similar methods for incorporating Louisiana French into their curriculum. Campbell explained dedicated a part of her French lesson to teaching Louisiana French. She explained to her students, “I want you to know how to speak to people on the street here when you see them.” She worked to dispel their understanding that speaking a variety of Louisiana French was wrong. She also explained that their learning of Standard French was vital if they wanted to speak French in other countries, read French and understand other French speakers. Similarly LaFleur, pushed to incorporate local varieties of French into her curriculum. Her methodology involved getting students to go out and gather the local language. “I was

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<sup>91</sup> Trépanier, “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity,” 162.

<sup>92</sup> Cécyle Trépanier elaborates on this in her article “The Cajunization of French Louisiana: Forging a Regional Identity.”

teaching in St. Martin and I was not originally from that area,” she explained, “so the French there was different from the French I heard growing up.” In order to become more familiar with the local variety, LaFleur made friends with the janitors and cooks at school and asked them how to say certain words. When she switched to a different parish in Louisiana in her career she would do the same thing in order to become acquainted with the local dialect.

Campbell tended to have a slightly different opinion about Louisiana French as a written language than the rest of the subjects interviewed. Campbell argued that Louisiana French today is bad because it does not come from a printed source. She explained that the language gets misinterpreted from someone’s grandmother and results in mispronunciation or misuse. “It’s what they think they heard their grandmother say or what they think their uncle was saying and they mispronounce a lot of words,” she clarified. This is part of the reason Campbell was so focused on Standard French in her classroom. She wanted her students to have the ability to read French and then understand Louisiana French based on what they already knew. While she strongly agreed there is a place for Louisiana French in the classroom, that place was not at the forefront of her lessons.

LaFleur explained, “People had an idea of what was good French.”<sup>93</sup> At the time, the early 1970s, Louisiana French was not considered “good” French. The idea of teaching Louisiana French was somewhat of an edgy notion. Campbell equated a Louisiana French dictionary to a Louisiana English dictionary. “I just don’t think we need that,” she explained, “For example, we say ‘Whatcha gonna do?’ How would you spell that? We use slang but we don’t want a dictionary.” Over time, however, a Louisiana dictionary did come to life, and LaFleur was one of the leaders of the project. “We had to prove to Domengeaux that this could be done,” said

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<sup>93</sup> Amanda LaFleur, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana October 24, 2016.

LaFleur. Along with Barry Jean Ancelet, Michael Picone, Richard Guidry, and other linguistic and French specialists, Amanda LaFleur worked for years to create the *Dictionary of Louisiana French: As Spoken by Cajun, Creole, and American Indian Communities*, published in 2010. The dictionary took nearly twenty years to complete and is a compilation of words and phrases from the many different French dialectal regions of Louisiana.

Though Domengeaux did not see the publication of this dictionary, he did begin to reconsider Louisiana French as an important aspect of revitalizing French language and culture in Louisiana in 1980, with the publication of *Cris Sur le Bayou*.<sup>94</sup> What the politician seemed to lack initially was a clear understanding the place of Louisiana French in Standard French language education. Following Domengeaux's reevaluation, CODOFIL hired Richard Guidry, an SLS teacher, to manage all foreign language and bilingual department education programs. According to Bernard, Guidry was an outspoken activist who passionately supported Louisiana French education.<sup>95</sup> LaBry and Douet both recalled being heavily involved in writing curriculum with Richard Guidry.<sup>96</sup> Douet also referenced Homer Dyess who was the Director of Foreign languages at the Louisiana Department of Education, as a major force in the revitalization of French language in Louisiana schools.

Despite this shift, Domengeaux maintained relationships with foreign advisors throughout the francophone world who shared his longing for Standard French. One such colleague was Canadian historian Bona Arsenault. Domengeaux and Arsenault consulted frequently and Arsenault also believed that Louisiana French was not sustainable in the school system

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<sup>94</sup> Bernard, *Cajuns: The Amercanization of a People*, 129. Bernard credited cultural activist Barry Jean Ancelet and the publication of his book of French poems *Cris sur le bayou* in 1980 for Domengeaux's shift in perspective.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> David Cheramie, interview by Natalie Ducote, Lafayette, Louisiana, January 26, 2017. David Cheramie credited Richard Guidry with writing the book on Louisiana French education.

Domengeaux utilized Arsenault to support his vision of teaching only Standard French in schools. Born near New Brunswick, Arsenault had Acadian roots and, like Domengeaux, believed that the French language in Louisiana could only survive if Standard French was taught. In a May 31, 1982 correspondence between the two men, Arsenault responded to Domengeaux's request that he write a letter to the editor of the *Lafourche Gazette* regarding an article that quoted Arsenault's book *The History of the Acadians*. In the attached letter to the editor, Arsenault explained that recent sections of his book were published as part of an article written by someone advocating for the teaching of Cajun French in Louisiana schools. Arsenault explained how this could be misleading to the paper's readers given the fact that he supported the teaching of "official Standard French" in Louisiana schools. Arsenault added:

"It is well known that the basic core of the Cajun language, as spoken today in certain parts of Louisiana, consists of words and expressions dating back from 300 to 400 years, which are not any more in use in the official French language such as taught, written and spoken in France, Belgium, Switzerland as well as in the province of Quebec and other parts of the world."<sup>97</sup>

Correspondence like this, late in Domengeaux's, career reiterated his global focus that was clear from the beginning. Sandy LaBry believed that one of his goals was to have successful liaisons with French-speaking nations. "He was much more interested in getting the bills passed and getting the big shots from France over to visit," said LaFleur. Even after his near acceptance of Louisiana French, he was convinced that in order for CODOFIL to succeed, Louisiana needed to rely heavily on support from its foreign partners.

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<sup>97</sup> Bona Arsenault to James Domengeaux, 31 May 1982, Box 3, file 13, Collection 206, Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette.

## Conclusion

Based on these interviews little evidence to suggests that Domengeaux stifled local teachers' efforts in teaching Louisiana French. "Regardless of what his [Domengeaux] efforts were, something very good came from it," said LaFleur. LaBry agreed that Domengeaux kick started the initiative and the teachers kept the ball rolling. In reality, the teachers possessed an autonomy for which they were thankful. Despite the publicized debate over Standard vs. Louisiana French, all of the teachers agreed they were able to teach the language to the best to their ability in their classrooms. They worked happily alongside Foreign Assistance Teachers and played a vital role in the preservation of Louisiana French via the classrooms. In addition they all credited CODOFIL for helping to shape them into the educators they became. The organization broadened their horizons as teachers and exposed them to life-changing opportunities.

According to a 2012 *Seattle Times* article, the number of French speakers in Louisiana was estimated to be about 150,000 – 200,000.<sup>98</sup> This is a dramatic decrease from the U.S. census calculation in 1980, which estimated 572,264 French speakers in Louisiana. These statistics do not indicate the number of Louisiana French teachers vs. Standard French speakers.

Whether Louisiana French varieties native to the state will survive the next fifty years is difficult to determine. Increased exposure to English via increased access to media and travel in the 1950s resulted in a decline of the French language in Louisiana. As rural communities become even more connected with the rest of the world in the twenty-first century, the state of minority languages seems dire. However, increased access to resources can increase acquisition of dying languages like Louisiana French.

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<sup>98</sup> Sean Cockerham, "Louisiana French: L'heritage At Risk," *The Seattle Times*, July 6, 2012. The article does not indicate Louisiana French vs. Standard French speakers

Perhaps the best way to determine the future of the language is to take a cue from teachers. Louisiana currently has thirty-nine foreign language immersion schools. In August 2016, the largest group of CODOFIL French immersion teachers arrived in Louisiana. Sixty-one teachers were hired from francophone regions, including Louisiana, to serve as French as a Second Language Specialists. These immersion programs are rooted in Standard French, and while efforts are made to incorporate local culture, it is unclear how much Louisiana French is incorporated into the curriculum. The work of local Louisiana French teachers from the 1970s is still evident today. Despite the dwindling presence of the language their efforts, coupled with the resources of CODOFIL, are a large reason why Louisiana French is still hanging on today.

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### **Vita**

Natalie Ducote was born and raised in Hamburg, Louisiana, a settlement of about 300, in Central Louisiana. She attended Louisiana State University where she received a Bachelor of Arts in Mass Communication. Following graduation she worked at the Louisiana Lottery. She is currently pursuing a master's degree in public history at the University of New Orleans. She is hopeful for a quick recovery from the thesis-writing process and a return to her love for writing. She currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana.