Cajuns and WWII

Source 1

Excerpt from Cajuns
Shane K. Bernard

Much as the Civil War led to the “creation” of a distinctly Cajun people, World War II would integrate them into mainstream American culture. The mobilization of millions of U.S. soldiers and civilians included about twenty-five thousand Cajun GIs, many of whom had never left their home parishes before the war. Most of them spoke French as their first, if not only, language. World War II forced them to leave southern Louisiana for boot camps in far-flung sections of the United States, where everyone spoke English. They soon found themselves in ships, tanks, and foxholes around the globe with English-speaking GIs. Survival in combat depended on the Cajuns’ ability to speak English. Meanwhile, Cajuns on the home front immersed themselves in the war effort: buying war bonds, growing victory gardens, collecting scrap metal, and volunteering as auxiliary nurses, policemen, and firemen.

World War II transformed both Cajun GIs and civilians; increasingly they no longer regarded themselves as les Franc;ais and everyone else in the United State as les Américains. Rather, the Cajuns reveled in their newfound patriotism. In the postwar era, they eagerly embraced mainstream American culture, including rampant consumerism. Television, that great Americanizing agent, was among the products they consumed.

The influence of mainstream American culture also brought a new emphasis on the English language, which had already made inroads into the Cajun parishes. In 1916 the state of Louisiana passed a compulsory education law, prompting a flood of French-speaking children into southern Louisiana schools. Exacerbating the situation, the state legislature passed a new constitution in 1921, part of which stipulated that only English was to be spoken in the classroom. Educators dealt with the problem of teaching English to thousands of French-speaking children by meting out humiliating punishments to students caught speaking French. In 1944 Louisiana enacted an even tougher compulsory education law, again flooding classrooms with French-speaking children. Punishment continued until about 1960, when few, if any, solely French-speaking Cajun children remained.

Census data reflect the impact of this punitive policy on the French language in Louisiana. Beginning around World War II, the percentage of young Cajuns speaking French as their first language nosedived. Cajun children born in the postwar period primarily spoke English as their first language. In fact, so many Cajun baby boomers spoke only English that some observers predicted the complete disappearance of French in Louisiana.