

What I Learned From Five Years of Attending South Louisiana's French Tables

Growing up in south Louisiana, I heard French from an early age. My grandparents would call me "chère" (dear) and say "gardez donc!" when they were surprised. They had forgotten how to speak fluently, though, so I never learned beyond a few simple words. That all changed when my mother and I first visited Longfellow Evangeline, a state historic site in the small town of St. Martinville. It is an expansive park, including several Acadian cabins, a plantation home, a working forge, and a tourist center with a small museum. I went there on a second-grade field trip and was fascinated by the place. I never lost that fascination, and when I was eleven, my mother and I began to attend monthly programs there, called "French Tables."

The format was simple. Participants would arrive in the early morning and walk to a small Acadian cabin in the middle of the park. There would be "gâteau de sirop" (syrup cake) and "café au lait" (coffee with milk) waiting for us. While the sun rose and insects buzzed past, the twenty or so members sat on the porch and talked in Cajun French, played card games like bourré, and sang French songs. In addition, we received colorful vocabulary sheets, each focusing on a certain theme. In sugar cane season, we learned about the "canne à sucre" and how it was harvested. For Mardi Gras, we practiced saying sentences like "Monsieur, jetez-moi quelque chose!" (Throw me something, Mister!) Over the five years that I attended, I collected at least 60 of these sheets, and I still have all of them today.

I absolutely loved the French Tables. I dragged almost all of my friends to them at one point or another. My friend Jamie attended for several years, and we enjoyed dressing up in traditional Acadian skirts and aprons together. Attending the Tables also introduced me to the workers at the park. Madame Mary, the lady who ran the French Tables, always smiled when she saw me and corrected my French sentences. She even taught me how to guide tourists through the Maison Olivier, Longfellow's plantation home. Mr. Philip, a park ranger, showed me how to start fires and how to sharpen knives. Ms. Debbie, a tour guide, taught me how to sew leather and make rag dolls. I met others who attended the French Tables regularly, like Ms. LaLa, an herbalist who showed me how to identify native plants, and Mr. Tommy, a blacksmith who kept Longfellow's forge alive (he's now a full-time employee at Longfellow). I still see all of them regularly! Not only did the French Tables teach me vocabulary and French expressions, they introduced me to many wonderful people that otherwise, I never would have known.

Evidently, I was somewhat obsessed with French Tables! So, when I was twelve, I chose to do a Social Studies project focusing on what French Tables were and why people attended them. I created a poster board covered in burlap that I filled with pictures- many of them with my friends from the French Tables- and snippets of French vocabulary. I was eager to share my enthusiasm for my French heritage and culture through my project. After winning at my school, I ended up in third place at the regional competition! The next year, I made my project bigger and better by surveying hundreds of kids about whether they had heard of French Tables (unfortunately, the majority had not). To expand my research, I visited several other Tables in places like Scott, Arnaudville, and New Iberia, and interviewed the organizers of those Tables. I enjoyed seeing the variety of programs across the state. After all my hard work, I advanced to state competition and earned fifth! That was the end of my project, but I genuinely enjoyed competing and telling others about the French Tables.

In addition to surveying kids for my social studies project, I also surveyed regular French Table members about why they attended the programs. Although the answers varied, almost all the participants said one thing in particular: they believed that the French Tables helped to keep the Cajun culture and language alive. And anything that keeps Cajun French alive is incredibly important. Although Louisiana is known for its rich French Acadian heritage, the number of French speakers is decreasing quickly. According to the New York Times, between 1990 and 2013, the number of French speakers declined by 150,000

people. It used to be common to hear Cajun French spoken in public places; now, it has almost entirely been replaced by English. It is incredibly sad to watch the language fade away.

The reason for the decline of Cajun French in Louisiana is, ultimately, prejudice. In the early 20th century, English speakers disapproved the rural French that the Cajuns spoke and began efforts to eradicate the language. Young Cajun French speakers were punished in school if they did not speak English, leading to a widespread feeling of shame about their native language. Due to their embarrassment, they did not pass on the language to their children and grandchildren. This has resulted in a much culturally-poorer Louisiana. Recently, however, there has been somewhat of a “Cajun French Renaissance.” The French Tables are part of this movement, and other revival attempts include bands performing French songs, French immersion programs for elementary students, and the efforts of CODOFIL (the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana) to preserve the language. While the Tables are certainly helpful in keeping Cajun French alive, it is unknown if it will ever truly become common in Louisiana again.

In 2017, Madame Mary made the difficult decision to dissolve the Longfellow Evangeline French Table. In earlier years, at least twenty people would come every Saturday; now, membership had dwindled to five or fewer. I still visit Longfellow often, and I’m still in love with French! I now attend a school that offers classes in advanced French, and due to them, my skill has improved rapidly. One of my favorite uses of French is talking to my grandparents– they may not be able to converse fluently, but they can understand me. I’m not fully fluent yet, but thanks to the French Tables and my amazing mentors throughout the years, I am much closer to my goal. I can only hope that others gain the desire to learn and pass on the beautiful Cajun French language.