Left Coast Creole: Once L.A. supported a thriving hub of New Orleans...

ANDREA FORD TIMES STAFF WRITER
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Davone Wallace, above, looks around as Archie Lacey makes a purchase from Lloyd Girard Jr. at Girard's Louisiana Fish Market, a gathering place for local Creoles looking for authentic Zatarain's crab meat boil or real Louisiana hot sauce. Alvin Girard, below left, and Irwin Bordenave hang out at the market. Many Creoles have left their old neighborhoods for the suburbs.

Left Coast Creole once L.A. supported a thriving hub of New Orleans immigrants. But times have changed. The traditions and culture exist now only in scattered pockets as younger people abandon the old ways.

By ANDREA FORD, TIMES STAFF WRITER

Roland Davidson vividly remembers the day in 1956 when he tooled into town after a four-day drive from New Orleans and found his Louisiana Creole culture waiting for him in South-Central Los Angeles.

He heard the familiar dropped Rs of New Orleans' 7th Ward along East 61st Street. And a short drive away, on a strip of Jefferson Avenue between Arlington and Crenshaw Boulevards, he found restaurants that served authentic crab etoufée and gumbo Creole-style, barbershops where news from New Orleans was discussed as if the patrons had never left there, and shops where a working man could buy a fried fish or shrimp Po' boy on a crispy French roll.

"Everybody we hung around with was from New Orleans... [including] people who I went to school with in New Orleans," Davidson recently recalled. "It was just like we all moved up here and got together again."

Forty years later, Davidson can't say the same. Gone are many of the markets, barbershops and social halls that lined Jefferson...
Continued from El Avenue during the 1940s and 1950s and catered to newly arrived Creoles.

Like other ethnic groups, many Creoles made their homes in different neighborhoods for the suburbs. This was the case of the neighborhood where Creole enclaves sprang up, once nearly all Creole are now here. Although the Creole neighborhood is person is accompanied by aamy the tradition, the movement toward a culture some consider outdated.

As a retired aerospace worker who still lives in South Los Angeles, I've noticed a significant shift in New Orleans Creole history for 20 years, says such demographic changes and the resultant increase in the number of the young were inevitable, given the migration and the social changes that faced Creoles once they left their small-town neighborhoods in New Orleans.

Arthe Anthony, an American studies professor at Loyola College who has studied Creoles in New Orleans, finds the phenomenon to what eventually happens to most immigrant communities.

"You can maintain some of the features of the culture, but it changes significantly over time," said Anthony, a Creole who came to the city when he was young.

"The culture's standard-bearers still live in the so-called French Quarter area of the French Quarter, a major tourist destination, where high-end hotels and restaurants and nightclubs cater to a very wealthy clientele. This is older than the United States.

-- Inside St. John of Evangelist Catholic Church, one of the oldest churches in New Orleans, St. Peter's Day, Helen Bordenave, 52, stood watching six men in white cassocks, black caps, and aprons, a triumphant figure, gingerly carrying a 3-foot cross.

Following by about 60 mostly Creole congregants who had just celebrated Mass, the procession headed across Victoria Street, off Esplanade Avenue and into the parish hall. There, the statue, inside an open-faced box, was placed on an altar already spilling over with red carnations and white lilies. The white aprons and capes of the altar boys, wine and ornately decorated cheese were washed away.

After Father Melvin James blessed the altar, the bread was cut as the creoles sang "Lament for the Dead," for good fortune.

After a procession of hogs began, at the end of which as many as 300 people would have been served, a feast of turkey, ham, mashed potatoes and a traditional New Orleans dish of braised beef and rice with spicy sausage.

Throughout, celebrants socialized, shared stories and joyfully secularized "second-line," with dance and music, clapping, snake charmed tambourine umbrellas and waving handkerchiefs like celebrants.

But this was a celebration of St. John the Baptist, patron saint of Creoles, who was celebrated by going to the church of St. John the Baptist church, one of several Creole social clubs in Los Angeles, by meeting up at a bar, and by voting in the local elections. The Creoles have a rich heritage. He was a leader in the efforts to protect the language and culture of the Creoles.

The Catholic Church, along with the local Creole community, hold the biggest festivals in Los Angeles and in the French Quarter. The annual festival, which includes the St. John the Baptist Day parade and a community-wide Mass, is broadcast on the radio and television. The festival draws people from all over the United States and abroad.

The annual festival in Acadiana, on or around the end of August, is a celebration of the Creole heritage. The festival draws people from all over the world, including Creoles from Louisiana, Texas, and the Caribbean.

The festival is held in honor of St. Louis, the patron saint of Creoles, and includes a parade, a mass, a Mardi Gras-style ball, and a fireworks display.

Creole culture is celebrated in festivals around the United States, including in schools, museums, and cultural centers. The Creole culture is also celebrated in literature, music, and art, with many Creole authors, musicians, and artists contributing to the cultural legacy.