

Regional

French roots go deep in U.S., St. Louis history

Sometimes we forget about the French influence in American history and culture, including the role that France played in America's independence. Recent popular books, such as historian David McCullough's "The Greater Journey," explore the intellectual and artistic influence France has had on the United States. But there are many others who research Franco-American relations and the importance of this relationship. One is Anne Juneau Craver, who recently delivered a lecture on the French influence on St. Louis during a lecture at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A native of St. Louis, Craver obtained a number of degrees from the Sorbonne in Paris and from St. Louis University. She received her doctorate in comparative literature from Washington University in St. Louis and a law degree in international and comparative law from St. Louis University. From an early age she showed a great deal of interest in languages.

"I started my French studies at the Academy of Visitation in the first grade and when I got to high school I began to get a little bit bored so they allowed me to add Spanish," she said. "Then one summer before my senior year of high school, a friend of mine and I discovered the Mark Twain Summer Institute connected with Washington University. So when we saw Chinese it just jumped out at us. I have to say I have always enjoyed Chinese cuisine."

Craver then decided to go to France. She thought that in order to really learn a language you have to live for a while in a country where that language is spoken.

"This is what I told my parents," she said. "I said, 'I've studied all this French language but I'm still not getting the fluency.' There is so much that doesn't exist in books. I mean the books I was dealing with back then were really limited in presenting the culture and idiomatic expressions."

Anyone who has learned a foreign language knows that there are some expressions that are used in everyday life that you can't learn from books.

"I encouraged all of my students when



Photo by Andre' Jouniaux

Dr. Craver at the tribute to Andrée Chedid at the Librairie l'Harmattan, Espace Méditerrané, Paris, France, June 15, 2012.

I was teaching to go to France, but it costs money," she said. "That's why when I was a teacher during my master's program at St. Louis University, I went to the department and I asked why we couldn't offer a basic conversational course for students who had one year of university French. They said they couldn't pay me for it, and I said that was fine."

After one year she had students telling her they couldn't afford to go to France

but they really wanted to improve their conversational skills.

"So I told them we could meet one, two, or three times a week," she said. "I had a group of 12 students that would come at different times and we just spoke. I would tell them to just speak like they would in English and not to be embarrassed. I just want you to speak."

Although most people in this geographic area have a general idea that

there is French influence in St. Louis – because of the city's name and the Louisiana Purchase – the American public in general, as well as people who live in St. Louis, do not have a full understanding of the French influence in the city.

"I don't think they do," said Craver. "I think they have some notion, that we were founded by two French men, Pierre Laclède and Auguste Chouteau,

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

but beyond that they really feel like, 'What do we have around us that is really French anymore?' And we have, unfortunately, very little around us to show.

"When I came to SIUE I was very honored to speak about a French newspaper published in St. Louis and its editor. I was able to compose a map of French businesses that were located underneath of where the Arch is today. First Street in the day was Main Street, and, of course, those streets had French names before the mayor and the aldermen changed that in 1826. They wanted to be more like Philadelphia, and gave the streets all names of trees," Craver explained.

There was, she added, at least a portion of the population in St. Louis that, even all the way to the 19th century, were communicating in French, despite an influx of Germans and Italians. That language barrier created some cultural clashes.

"The French were pretty appalled when the Germans came to town because the Germans love their beer," she explained. "We had at one time 32 breweries going before prohibition. That is why the French started to move south into the Soulard neighborhood. They wanted to distance themselves from the Germans and their drinking. The French enjoyed the finest wine still and certain etiquette and they really didn't understand this German culture coming in with their drinking."

According to Craver, the French spoken in St. Louis at that time was a bit different from that which was spoken in France. "In addition to that, what I found is an incorporation of English words into the language, as we find in Canada today. Sometimes the word is used in English and sometimes in French in the middle of a French sentence."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.