Acadians' brutal journey
Speaker recounts hardships of Acadian ancestors

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ST. MARTINVILLE — The second Congrès Mondial Acadien isn't over yet but plans are being made for the third, set for 2004 on Canada's seacoast in Nova Scotia.

A large delegation from there attended Gérard Braud's lecture Monday at St. Martinville City Hall and distributed brochures, bumper stickers and other information about the next reunion of the world's Acadians.

The date is significant, said one, because it will mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival of French settlers in the New World and the 250th anniversary of the deportation of more than 10,000 Acadians from their homeland by the English.

Braud was speaking on the lengthy journey of many of those exiled Acadians to seaports in France. After 150 years in Canada they were no more French than they were English, save for a somewhat common language.

Vivian Doucet Gillan of Nova Scotia was talking to a Louisiana cousin about that language. Their speech went back and forth, from French to English, and both were laughing and crying at the same time. 

“Our French, it is an old French, but the words are very good,” Doucet-Gillan said. “Maybe it sounds like the English ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ sometimes, but it is very, very good, and we understand you and you understand us.”

St. Martinville Mayor Eric Martin, who has been brushing up on his French through classes at the Acadian Memorial, agreed.

“Sending the Acadians back to France would be like sending us all back to France. By then we were Acadians, period.”

Eric Martin
St. Martinville mayor

France, arrived in 1785 on seven sailing ships. Their number doubled the Acadians who had already found their way to Louisiana thanks to a Spanish government that wanted to settle the territory.

The rest, as Braud said, is l'histoire.

More than 2,000 Acadians were loaded onto sailing ships bound for France. Those who survived the voyage on the crowded merchant vessels were deposited by the British in a dozen seaport towns, Braud said, the most prominent being Nantes on the Atlantic coast, a prosperous city then and today.

Some made their way inland, to Paris, Bordeaux and St. Malo, but most remained in coastal villages. And their allegiance to old Acadie and to each other remained strong, Braud said. His lecture was in French, but the ensuing discussion with the standing-room-only audience was bilingual.

Thirty years would go by before the scattered Acadians could commingle their resources to secure ships to bring them to Louisiana, where Joseph Brous-sard dit Beausoleil had led a band of Acadian resistance fighters and their families in 1765.

The Acadians of Nantes,