Text By Patricia Courvelle
Photos by Michael Comeaux
(More Photos on Page 4)

Allons au Bal de Noce!

STARTING IT OFF — Connie and Terry Savoie head the bridal procession at their "bal de noce" at Bourque's Club in Lewisburg.

PARENTS THERE, TOO — Connie and Terry's parents were there to take part in the wedding dance fun. From left are Mr. and Mrs. Horace Daigle, the newlyweds, and Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Savoie, all of Church Point.

FOR WEDDING PARTY ONLY — The first musical selection at the French wedding dance is dedicated to members of the wedding party and relatives of the newlyweds.

QUITE OFTEN Cajun wedding customs and traditions terminate in a traditional French dance.

Saturday Night in S.W. Louisiana

The French Wedding Dance, a first cousin of the fais-do-do, is a popular tradition which has been preserved for many generations of Acadians and is still going strong today in Southwest Louisiana. It is not at all unusual to find newlyweds celebrating their marriage with relatives and friends at a French nightclub on Saturday night. In fact, many young Acadian couples feel that their wedding day's events just wouldn't be complete without a French dance that night.

Connie Gayle Daigle and Paul Terry Savoie of Church Point are a typical Acadian couple who feel this way. When Connie and Terry set their wedding date for last March 3, one of the first things they did was contact a local nightclub owner to stage a French dance in their honor on the evening of their wedding. The club selected was Bourque's Club in Lewisburg, a small community about 10 miles southwest of Opelousas.

According to the club owner, Leon Bourque, a wedding dance is a common Saturday night happening. In fact, some Saturday nights there are as many as three couples celebrating their weddings. The only thing it does is augment the regular weekly fais-do-do.

Terry, son of Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Savoie, and Connie, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Horace Daigle, all of Church Point; were married in the morning on Saturday, March 3, in Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Church. Theers was certainly a wedding performed in the shadows of Acadian tradition. Following the reception, the young couple spent the remainder of the afternoon visiting the older folks, "grandmère," "cousins," and "tantes," who were unable to make it to church for the wedding. And as they went about their visiting, they made certain that everyone got a cordial invitation to their "bal de noce," (wedding dance) planned for that night.

The French wedding dance has a long heritage held special significance for Connie and Terry, who both come from French-speaking families. Several members of both the Savoie and Daigle families had previously had wedding dances, and Connie and Terry weren't about to disrupt this family tradition.

At about 9 o'clock on the evening of their wedding, Terry and Connie, accompanied by members of the bridal party and relatives, lined up into a formal procession and entered the dance hall. The voices of the Saturday night revelers at Bourque's Club became silent, and Blackie Forestier and his Cajun Aces Band of Jennings began "La Marche des Mariés." Walking in arm, Connie and Terry were followed by the bridesmaids and groomsmen, all dressed in full wedding attire and walking in couples.

Immediately behind the bridal party were the parents of the newly-wed couple and other close relatives. The procession circled the dancehall to the accompaniment of the Cajun Aces music, but half-way through the second circle, the band changed its tempo to a livelier number — something like "Cher Tou- toue" or "Allons à Lafayette." Members of the bridal procession began dancing, the hand got livelier and livelier, and so did the dancing.

This part of the wedding dance is devoted strictly to the bridal party members. Spectators stay off the dance floor for a couple of songs and watch the wedding feud musical numbers. But after that, everyone gets into the act, and pretty soon the place is rocking. Teenagers dance side by side with the "grandpas" and the "grandmas."

The Saturday night wedding dance is not for the young, nor is it for the old: it's simply for those young at heart.

If you're looking for the true Cajun "joie de vivre," the Saturday night French dance is where it's at. An atmosphere of friendliness and good will prevails. It affords folks an opportunity to visit with their neighbors, relax from the week's chores and just have a good time, or "bon temps" as the Cajuns call it. And the language most often spoken? Why, it's French, of course!

What is the typical French dance hall like? Usually there is a long bar near the entrance of the rectangular building. A partition separates the bar from the dancing area. The wooden walls are unadorned, but the festive spirit of the Saturday night crowd makes the place anything but dreary.

Dancing goes on until the wee hours of the morning, and of course, the newlyweds are the most popular couple on the dance floor. It is a Cajun tradition for a gentleman to pin a dollar bill on the bride's veil if he wishes to dance with her. And from the number of bills on bride Connie's veil, it can certainly be assumed that she was quite a popular young lady.

Leon Bourque, as many of the French club owners do at such functions, presented a gift of money to Connie and Terry. And that is a welcome gift for most newly-wed couples.

Terry and Connie are making their home in Church Point, which is typical of Acadian descendants. They chose the Saturday night crowd makes the place anything but dreary.
BEST WISHES — Saturday night revelers at the fais do-do take time out from dancing to extend best wishes to the newly-married couple.

JOIE DE VIVRE — Both young and old crowd the dance floor, and there's a prevailing "joie de vivre" at such social functions in Southwest Louisiana.

Allons au Bal
(Continued from Page 2)
"bal de noce," just as they did "back then."

Let's go back in time and trace the old-fashioned Acadian courtship, which Lauren C. Post vividly relates in his book, Cajun Sketches. Suppose a young man came to the neighboring farmhouse to inquire about a cow. The head of the household invited him in for a cup of tea. The young maid paid no attention because she was "too busy." She was probably wearing her commonest dress and was barefooted. Her "garde-soleil," a sunbonnet, usually hid her face.

But come Saturday night, the young man made up for his lost time. He danced with the same girl, and after "Home Sweet Home," he walked her to the carriage. Of course, the family was in full attendance. The next morning the young man was at the right place and the right time to escort the girl to church.

ENGAGEMENTS were of varying length. If the girl was going to be married by the time she was 17, the romance had to be brief. A caller without serious matrimonial intentions was merely wasting a girl's time. The girl (though she didn't admit it) and her family wanted only the attention of likely prospects. The prospective groom asked his fiancée's parents for her hand in marriage. Come Thursday night and the young man showed up in his Sunday best, everybody knew what was on the night's agenda. The future groom stuttered through a well-rehearsed speech, but nevertheless, he made himself understood.

Then things really got underway. The license was obtained the next Saturday, the bans were read in church for three consecutive Sundays. The wedding was scheduled for the next Saturday, and the number of guests to be served determined the girl's popularity and the family's status.

The wedding took place at the nearest town in late afternoon. An important wedding always had a long procession of buggies. The bride and her father rode in the first buggy, the groom and his father rode in the second carriage. Mama usually wasn't in any buggy, though; she stayed at home because she was "much too sad." Other relatives followed.

Following the ceremony, the newlyweds rode in a buggy pulled by the fastest horse available. A helter-skelter race back home was on. The two papas rode in the second buggy. From then on it was anybody's race. And to liven things up there was drinking and accordion playing.

The "bal de noce" was held that night, with the wedding crowd augmenting the regular Saturday night crowd at the fais do-do hall.

SOME CHANGES? Certainly, but the "bal de noce" is still going strong. Hopefully this custom will survive for many generations to come, for if it is lost, a colorful part of the Acadiana heritage will be gone forever.