Archeology dispels Cajun myth

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Staff Writer

THIBODAUX — The bodies of 16 adults and four infants buried almost 150 years ago in St. Joseph Cemetery here have been exhumed from their abandoned graves.

The mordant work is connected to the lively, gregarious Congrès Mondial Acadien activities taking place throughout Acadiana until Aug. 15.

Lucretia McBride, forensic consultant, spoke about the exhumation in a symposium Monday at McNicholls State University.

"The myth of the poor, dumb Cajun is not going to exist much longer," McBride said, adding that her forensic archaeological work, which has been going on for five years, will continue for several more years.

Her symposium Monday was part of the Congrès Mondial Acadien activities.

To judge by the burial garments and the coffins, the Acadians buried in the cemetery were anything but poor.

Celeste Leontine Gaude Lapere, 27, died in 1852 and was buried in a black silk taffeta dress. Her sister, Clemence Elizabeth Gaude Tucker Evans, 35, died in 1857 and was buried in her silk nightgown. Pennington Wade Tucker, 14, died in 1853 and was buried in shoes that were unscuffed.

All three were children of Acadian exiles from the Canadian Maritimes. At least three generations of Acadians preceded them.

All three were taken to the grave in hermetically sealed cast iron coffins costing, at the time, upwards of $35. Because the coffins were airtight, the bodies were in good condition.

How they came to be discovered, examined, and re-interred is a forensic odyssey that McBride has been working on for almost five years.

Experts in textiles from LSU and at least 80 other professionals, volunteers and graduate students.

Roy Olivier is a lawyer in Milledgeville, Ga., and a descendant of the subjects of McBride's work. When the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux began efforts to identify abandoned graves, he said he realized the opportunity to learn more about his past and secured McBride's services. She is an independent forensic consultant and legal death investigator from Houma.

"This will add a new chapter to the story of Acadian culture in Louisiana," McBride said Monday.

A candlelight memorial service was held Monday at the cemetery on La. 1 after the daylong symposium.

A photographic display giving a visual overview of the project will be on display at the Allen J. Ellender Memorial Library on the Nicholls campus daily through Aug. 14. Other presentations will be held at the Bayou Terrebonne Waterlife Museum in Houma during Congrès Mondial Acadien.

(For details about the exhibit, call the Waterlife Museum at (504) 580-7200.)