Bayou Folk Museum Honors Writer

By ANN CHOPIN

It isn't every day that a museum is unveiled, but Louisiana did just that early this month. The Kate Chopin home in Cloutierville, located in the southern part of Natchitoches Parish, was shown to hundreds of visitors on its opening.

Bayou Folk Museum, by which the ante-bellum home will be known, derives its name from the book of short stories of the Cane River country. "Bayou Folk" was written by the late Katherine O'Flaherty Chopin, the most distinguished short story writer in Louisiana of her time.

The nineteenth century author lived for three years in the solid old house, constructed of heart cypress and pine, and built in the early 1800's. The ten-room structure is a good example of the architecture of its era. The four fireplaces in the house all share one chimney rising above the rooftop.

Kate Chopin's literary career was started with one kerosene lamp, began not born for some years following her death in 1883 from what was then called "swamp fever." Most of the author's works depicted the life of the Creole folk, their plain and simple way of life, their dialect, and their superstitions.

The restoration of the old home and its opening as a museum culminates a life's dream for Mrs. K. D. McCoy of Cloutierville, who purchased the house in the fall of 1954. Her displays of hundreds of period articles from an extensive personal collection, which all started with one kerosene lamp, began years before the Chopin house was purchased.

EACH ROOM HOLDS interesting items, all local articles found in the more modest homes of the community. Practically all the furniture was in a deteriorated state, but was restored and refinished by a talented hand of the community.

The entrance room on the ground floor has as its focal point a large photograph of the author, hanging above the desk where one registered. The book, "Bayou Folk," was placed close by. The oval frame on the Chopin portrait was given to the late Dr. Sam Scruggs by the author herself in the late 1880's, and was recently given to Mrs. McCoy by Mrs. Lawrence Carnahan Sr., daughter of Dr. Scruggs.

Different from other tourist attractions is the showing of the third floor and attic. By so doing, the owner feels many tourists will be interested in viewing the structure and architecture of the building, believed to have been built about 1815. Square nails, handmade hinges, bolts, keys and brick, can all be viewed on the third floor.

Among articles exhibited are Justice of the Peace records, bills, notes and transactions of old store businesses of the early 1800's; sewing machines, one more than a hundred years old; a Civil War display consisting of old guns, sabres, powder horns and documents; and a fine collection of old and rare colored bottles, unamortized decanters and medicine bottles from France are exhibited in a closed-in upstairs attic gallery.

THE DEED OF 1816 to St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, has been translated from French by Dr. Eve Mouton of the language department of Northwestern State College. Two prayer books and a Bible, all 100 years in age; a Redemptorist mission cross of 1889; a cutler used for the communion host, and a piano and organ dated 1855 are all there to be seen.

Along with the church exhibit is a picture of the Rev. Jean M. Beaulieu, first resident priest at Cloutierville, who arrived there in 1854, remaining until his death in 1897. Kate Chopin referred to the local pastor in several of her stories as "Fr. Antoine." The priest is buried in the cemetery adjoining the church.

Bayou Folk Museum has been built from old lumber and square nails retrieved from houses nearby. New painted green, the shutters enhance the beauty of the freshly painted outside walls of white.

To be added are a blacksmith shop, a doctor's office, complete with apothecary; and an outdoor kitchen. Dozens of items already collected will add to the completion of these additional buildings.

FORS THOSE INTERESTED in seeing Louisiana's newest landmarks addition, Bayou Folk Museum is located about 20 miles south of Natchitoches at La. 491, just off of Highway 1 South. Mrs. McCoy will conduct tours of the house each Saturday and Sunday from 2 to 6 p.m.