Bayou Folk Museum renovation to start

Kate Chopin House exhibits removed; some returned to owners

By ROBIN MILLER
The Alexandria Daily Town Talk

CLOUTIERVILLE — The walls are empty, the floors are bare. Odd to see the house in this condition.

But that's the way the Bayou Folk Museum stands now.

As of Dec. 16, all of its contents were either boxed or wrapped up and moved to other locations. Doors were closed, and museum business shut down until April.

Renovation work will take place while the museum is closed. A climate control system will be installed; papers and books organized; and some electrical outlets rewired.

The work is a result of combined funding from the National Park Service, the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches and private donations.

The museum, also known as the Kate Chopin House, is a registered National Historic Landmark. Chopin, famed for her short novel "The Awakening," wrote about women and their individuality in a male-dominated world. She was eventually ostracized for her provocative subject matter despite her famous Creole stories, such as "Bayou Folk" and "A Night in Sadie."

Chopin lived briefly in the house during the late 1880s.

"There are 2,266 National Historic Landmarks in the United States, and only 10 percent of them are west of the Mississippi River," said Sadie Newell, the president of the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. "Three of those places are in the Natchitoches area, with the National Historic District, Melrose Plantation and the Kate Chopin House."

"They're going to put vents in the floor when they install the climate control system to preserve the house's historic walls," Newell said.

The first floor is covered by concrete.

"They'll take a sledgehammer to the floors to put in the vents," curator Amanda Chenault said.

"Then we'll cover it with brick pavers," Newell said. "They're not very thick, and they're easy to walk on."

Melrose Plantation is storing some artifacts, and the Cammie G. Henry Research Center in the Watson Library at Northwestern State University is organizing and preserving the books and papers.

"We're going to have a research room when we reopen," Chenault said.

The research room will be on the ground floor. Next to the research room will be a welcoming area, where tourists will watch a video about Chopin.

After the renovation, antique furniture will be moved back into the house.

Other items will either remain in storage or have already been returned to original owners.

Community members have loaned items for museum display in past years.

Some of the most notable pieces were found in the downstairs entrance area, including a pump organ and two angel statues.

These items were on loan from St. John the Baptist Catholic Church down the street. The pieces stood in the original church building, which burned.

"They're going to set up their own exhibit," Chenault said. "We've arranged for them to have one of our long glass cases on permanent loan so they will be able to set up their display."

Books and papers for the research room will be housed in armoires, which will be moved downstairs from bedrooms.

Bedrooms will once again be furnished with beds and dressers, including a dresser once owned by Chopin.

The Kate Chopin House was built in 1809 by Alexis Cloutier, from whom Cloutierville is named. It was opened as a museum in 1965. Mildred LaCaze McCoy owned the building and collected most of the artifacts that were on display.

McCoy donated the house to Northwestern, and APHN bought it from the college.

"The house is going to focus on Kate Chopin with the Bayou Folk Museum in tandem," Newell said.

"We want to have it done in time for Northwestern's Kate Chopin Conference, which is scheduled in April," she said.