Bienvenue au Congres Mondial

FRIDAY, JULY 30, 1999

As Louisiana continues to celebrate 300 years of French influence with its New Orleans 1999, the Congres Mondial Academy kicks off its two week-long celebration of the Cajun culture, heritage and way of life. More than 89 families will reside with their cousins from around the world, but primarily Canada.

"It's always hard to say exactly what it is because it's so big and there's so many things involved," said Valerie Roy, director of communications for the Congres Mondial Academy. "But the Congres is 56 family reunions involving 99 families altogether. It is some of the largest Cajun/Acadian events you'll ever see. It is different every year. And it is turning of ages where we took kids in Canada and return them with ears here because these have remarkable stories."

Lafayette will be welcomed with the New Brunswick city of Moncton. The two towns will celebrate their Acadian ties in a special demonstration. Album will be held Aug. 13.

The first Congres Mondial Academy was held in Canada in 1994 between 3,000 and 5,000 Cajuns from Louisiana took part in the celebration. Shortly thereafter a board of directors was formed to head efforts to bring the celebration to Louisiana. According to Roy, the thing that interested the Cajuns and the Louisiana the most was family reunions.

"The Acadian sunsets were really stones to keep Cajun culture alive," Roy quipped. "And while they were in Canada, they realized that the Acadians from Canada, they feel a special link to the Cajuns. We not only think that they are our cousins, but our brothers and sisters. That's how we feel about them. So it was kind of natural to have another one here in Louisiana."

The Congres Mondial Academy grows as an umbrella under which the 56 family reunions are organized. More than 1,000 volunteers from the various families planning reunion have put together sittings (and in some cases, weekend long) fees to celebrate family and to meet distant relatives from their Acadian past who are traveling from Canada to be there.

According to Roy, each family is planning a special reunion and no two will be the same. "If you attend one family reunion, you may get there in the morning and there may be a brunch or breakfast," Roy said.

"There will be Cajun music, that's for sure. Then during the afternoon, there may be a genealogy conference from someone who has done a lot of research of the family tree. Then there might be a dinner and a big party at the end. That's how our family reunions might go."

Roy noted that the Congres Mondial Academy is not only a celebration of the Cajun culture, but also a way to keep the Cajun culture alive among the younger generation of Cajuns.

"People from South Louisiana are known for their music and their food, but there has always been a drain concerning their culture and their past," Roy said. "People made fun of them and the way they talked, so they really got ashamed of who they were and they lost their culture. The Congres is finally a forum that celebrates Cajun culture. And yes, there will be food and fun and there will be music, but what about their culture? There will be people coming here because of the food and not because of the music, the balance of who they are and that's the difference."

While the family reunions are the main events under the umbrella of the Congres Mondial Academy, there will also be numerous events in various section within the Cajun neighborhood in order to say their final farewell.

"The final concert is the big highlight of the Congres," Roy said. "It's really one last chance to meet everybody again. We'll think we'll go amazing show. It will be worth it. It will really be worth it."

Tickets for the final concert range in price from $20 to $30 and can be obtained through TicketMaster.

Anyone seeking information on any of the events or family reunions can call the Congres Mondial Academy's office toll free at 1-800-556-9999, log on to the website at www.cma-k99.com or visit a local travel bureau.