Cajun congress to include reports on genetic issues

By The Associated Press

BROUSSARD — It will be more than just a family reunion in August when descendants of the Canadian exiles who settled southern Louisiana in the 18th century gather for the Congress Mondial Acadien 1999.

It also will be an opportunity to educate Cajuns about genetic afflictions common in their communities.

Dr. John Doucet, professor of genetics at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux and a researcher with the Center for Molecular and Human Genetics at LSU Medical Center in New Orleans, asked for and received assistance in his educational effort from members of La Famille Beausoleil.

La Famille Beausoleil is the name of the Broussard family organization, one of the largest making plans for the CMA.

The organization takes its name from Joseph “Beausoleil” Broussard, who fought a bloody four-year guerrilla war against the British after thousands of Acadians were forced from Canada.

The Broussard reunion will begin on July 30, and Errol Brent Broussard, president of the organization, suggested at a recent planning meeting that the first day would be a good time for a presentation by Doucet on Friedreich Ataxia and Acadian Usher Syndrome. He would then be able to promote three other presentations planned in accordance with the CMA.

Friedreich Ataxia causes children to lose control of their muscles, including their abilities to walk, stand and reach, resulting in severe weakness and a shortened life.

Acadian Usher Syndrome results in children born with profoundly impaired hearing. Many of them lose their eyesight in early adulthood.

Friedreich’s Ataxia appears 2½ times more often among people of Acadian ancestry than in the population at large. Usher’s afflicts an estimated 800 Louisiana. Both are believed to be more common among Acadians than other groups because of long-ago marriages among kin in the tightly knit Acadian community.

Doucet said the Ataxia gene has been isolated, and he is optimistic that the Usher Syndrome gene will be before long.

Doucet said the subject of the two inherited maladies has been hushed over the years because of the stigma of so-called “inbreeding” in the Acadian or Cajun societies.

“That’s not really inbreeding,” he said, explaining that inbreeding is the deliberate concentration of genetic material by intermarrying within a family for a variety of reasons.

A good example, he said, is the consolidation of the imperial royal family of Russian czars which produced hemophilia.

In the case of the Acadian descendants, he said, it is a matter of having a “close cohesive society.”

Similar situations exist within other cultures, he said, including “Jews, Native Americans and Mormons.”

The CMA officially runs from Aug. 1 to 15. It is expected to be attended by 300,000 to 500,000 people at least partially descended from the original 300 settlers.

On Aug. 5, a free symposium on the “Genealogy of the Acadian People” will be held at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux.

On Aug. 9, another free public symposium, this one called “Genetics of the Acadian People,” will be held at McNeese State University in Lake Charles.

Finally, an “Academic Conference on the Acadian People” will gather historians specializing in that field at Hardin State University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette Aug. 10-12.

In addition, Doucet said, a forum on Acadian Usher Syndrome will be held from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. at J.H. Williams Middle School in Abbeville on March 6.