CAJUN
— From T-1

making, the Mardi Gras musicians never leave their wagon.

In the 19th and early 20th century, the Courir de Mardi Gras was celebrated in much of rural French Louisiana. However, the modernizing effect of new schools and churches and the Americanization of Cajun culture eventually led to its demise. Also, in many places, the run had become unruly and dangerous. Scores were often settled on this day with bare fists, knives and even pistols.

In 1950, Paul C. Tate Sr. undertook to revive the traditional Mardi Gras run in Mamou. But, unlike the old days, when the bawdy affair often erupted into bloody, drunken fights and damaged property, today’s Mardi Gras run is led under the iron hand of Le capitaine, a man with absolute control over his riders’ behavior.

Any male 16 or over can participate if he wears a costume and mask, pays the $8 fee and bears no weapons. Those without horses ride in tractor-drawn wagons. Beer and food along the way are free, as is the gumbo at the end of the day.

Mardi Gras participants gather at Mamou’s American Legion Home on Main Street around 6:30 a.m. From the time Le capitaine reads the run’s rules to the reentry into town later that day, his word is law.

All riders who make the run accept that agreement. About 200 males willingly submit to the authority of the chosen leader whose sole role is to get as intermediary between the madness of the run and the outside world.

Jasper J. Manuel, a 50-year-old car salesman and part-time deputy sheriff for Evangeline Parish, was chosen capitaine of the Mamou Courir in 1972. He will serve as long as he can ride, a horse.

Captain Manuel does not wear a mask, nor do his seven co-captains. They’re responsible for order; they want to be recognized. All wear cowboy hats and gold and purple or black and green capes. A white flag and his bullhorn distinguish Manuel from his co-captains.

Captains don’t drink during the Mardi Gras run. “We have to be good boys on that day,” Manuel quipped. However, the troops have plenty of beer. During the run, a truck with 120 cases of beer and another truck with more than 400 hard-boiled eggs and hundreds of pounds of boudin (spicy Cajun rice and pork sausage) follows the celebrants.

Midmorning they take a break to eat the eggs, and around noon they eat the boudin. “Eggs and boudin help absorb the alcohol,” Manuel maintained.

The advance route of the run is secret. It is le capitaine’s decision; not even the Mamou Mardi Gras organizers know just where he will lead his masked riders. The run is about 16 miles and usually gets underway between 7:30 and 8 a.m., and returns to town around 3 p.m.

Along the way, le capitaine chooses about 30 farmhouses to ‘beg’ for chickens. “I plan my route ahead of time,” Manuel said, “but don’t decide where to stop until I’m on the road.”

Le Capitaine stops his revelers at some distance from a house and approaches alone with a raised white flag. “Voulez-vous recevoir cette bande de Mardi Gras?” — “Do you wish to receive this Mardi Gras troupe?” — he asks the family.

If the answer is “Oui, M’sieu,” le capitaine lowers his flag to signal the invitation to charge the house. The riders thunder into the yard, dismount, clown, dance, sing and generally “faire le maque” — make monkeyshines.

As le capitaine collects chickens, or whatever, for the gumbo, he sends back the bounties to Mamou. Naturally, what is collected would never be enough to feed his troop, “Beforehand we buy three crates of chickens for that gumbo,” Manuel said. “Women spend all day brewing it at the American Legion Home. We usually feed about 4,000 people.”

By midafternoon horses and riders are weary and ragged as they approach Mamou. Le capitaine orders a stop just outside the town to regroup and regain a certain composure for the triumphant re-entry.

They ride two by two down Sixth Street, the town’s crowded main street, in haunted silence to the tune of the Mardi Gras song, deigning now and then to wave to admiring spectators. After they dismount, they dance in the streets for an hour or so, and then walk to the American Legion Home to devour all the gumbo they desire. The public is served after Mardi Gras participants are satisfied. The gumbo is great and costs only $2 for a huge bowl.

Although it is not encouraged, some people follow the Mardi Gras run in cars to get a glimpse of the riders charging down a farmer’s driveway. Since you don’t know where the run is going, it’s best to arrive in Mamou around 7 a.m. Accommodations in Mamou are limited to two motels and a hotel, so most visitors stay in Lafayette.

Don’t fret if you arrive late. Someone at the American Legion Home will tell you in what direction the run took off. The area is flat and roads are straight. Before long, you’re bound to spot the dallying run. Some motorists follow the run two or three hours and then return to Mamou to bar hop and dance on the main street to live Cajun music.

At 5 p.m., there’s a Mardi Gras dance at the American Legion Home. Everyone’s welcome — costume or not. Entrance is $3 per person, $5 per couple. About 9:30 p.m., there’s a contest for best costume. Judges, not from Mamou, are chosen on the spot from the audience. At the stroke of midnight, Mardi Gras ends. Ash Wednesday has arrived; Lent begins. The party’s over.

It is time for Jasper Manuel to claim again that how Mamou runs the Mardi Gras is the only true way. “Those big cities — New Orleans, Lafayette — they don’t have Mardi Gras,” he insists. “They have parades. I can see parades on television. Parades is parades. Mardi Gras is Mardi Gras!”

For accommodations in Lafayette, information on Lafayette’s Mardi Gras celebrations and parades schedules of Country Mardi Gras runs, contact the Lafayette Convention and Visitors Commission, P.O. Box 52966, Lafayette, La. 70505; telephone (318) 232-3737.

Creole diploma is just $15 and a lunch away

New Orleans visitors can bring back an unusual souvenir if they take advantage of an offer by Joe Cahn.

Cahn runs the New Orleans School of Cooking where, for $15, he’ll teach you a bit of Creole cooking: gumbo, jambalaya, bread pudding, and pecan pralines. Students get lunch and some recipes as well.

The school and its associated Louisiana General Store are located in the old Jackson Brewery building, overlooking the Mississippi in the historic French Quarter.

Those who want to delve more deeply into Creole cooking can buy, for $39.95, a videocassette (VHS or Beta) that will provide 75 minutes of entertainment and teach you a baker’s dozen Creole/Cajun recipes. The cassette is entitled, “The New Orleans School of Cooking Workout Program — An Exercise in Creole and Cajun Cooking.”

For more information, contact the New Orleans School of Cooking, 620 Decatur St., The Jackson Brewery, New Orleans, La. 70130, phone (504) 525-2933.