Cajuns retell ancestors’ history

Documentary to play at festival

BY MIKE FRANCINGUES
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LAFAYETTE — Cajuns from all walks of life — from cattlemen and shriners, to scholars and artists — tell the tales of their ancestors, painting a picture of Acadian history in a new documentary, “The Story of the Cajuns Part I.”

The documentary is the work of filmmaker Brenda Jepson, a native of Maine, who said the film has its roots in her intrigue about why she grew up surrounded by Thibodeauxs, Robichauds and other surnames so closely tied to Cajun culture.

Maine, she said, was one of the earliest French settlements in the New World.

“This is the first place the Acadians settled in 1604,” Jepson said. “They were here before Jamestown, before the Pilgrims. They were master farmers and builders hand-picked to help settle North America.”

Jepson said she learned about the early settlements while working on a previous film, “The Story of the Acadians,” with her husband, Alan Jepson.

“The Story of the Acadians,” which came out in 2006, describes how the agrarian settlers got caught between two of what were then the world’s strongest powers, France and Great Britain, in a struggle to gain control of North America.

The British forcefully removed the Acadians from Nova Scotia in the mid-1700s, and many found themselves in Louisiana.

Jepson said this is where “The Story of the Cajuns” picks up.

“That’s where it takes off, with the Cajuns,” she said. “What happened after the expulsion? We came down (to Louisiana) without any preconceived notions and just listened to people telling their stories.

I’m not a Cajun, so it was the only way I could have made this film.”

She said each interviewee in the film takes up a part of the Cajun story where the last interviewee left off, completing the tale from the expulsion to the eventual settling in Louisiana.

Although Jepson said she also filmed in France, Canada and Maine, where a number of the Acadian diaspora were relocated, she said the film is for and by the people of Louisiana.

“We just helped them tell their story,” she said.

Brenda Trahan, of Lafayette, helped arrange interviews for Jepson, whom she met through Francoise Paradis, a mutual friend and interviewer for the film.

Trahan said she was happy to collaborate with Jepson and to bring the Cajun story to people who don’t know as much as they would like.

“To share who we are,” Trahan said, “it’s something we need to do as Cajuns. People come for the food and the music but don’t really know the story of the people.”

Trahan also helped set up the premiere of the film, which Jepson wanted to be in Louisiana and which was held Saturday at Vista Shores Assisted Living residence home in New Orleans.

New Orleans is not the traditional home of Cajuns in Louisiana, Jepson admits, but Vista Shores is the home of Mary Anne Pecot de Boisblanc, a Cajun artist featured in the film.

De Boisblanc’s great-great-great-grandmother, Rosalie Pecot, had been separated from her sisters in the expulsion, Jepson said.

Pecot did not know what became of her siblings until they were reunited 40 years later.

The film features a painting by de Boisblanc that re-creates the reunion, which she envisioned from stories passed down to her from family members.

Jepson said the stories in the film were often so moving that she would find herself crying in the editing room.

“Knowing that there was a happy ending was the only thing that kept me going,” she said.

There will be free showings of the film at 6:30 p.m. Monday at the Acadian Memorial in St. Martinville, and at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at Vermilionville.

The film also will play continuously Wednesday through Sunday at Scène Chevron Heritage at Festival International.

To learn more, visit the Jepsons’ website at crownofmaineproductions.com or watch a short preview of the film at youtube.com/watch?v=H4jPAl4KEsA.