Church Point's Carnival has roots in medieval Europe

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CHURCH POINT — Pink, yellow and blue beads jangle from Cary LeJeune's costume. Still more brightly colored baubles dangle from his pointy cone hat. His face is covered with a brightly painted screen to mask his identity.

In between gyrations and jigs — dancing is only one of the rituals in the country Mardi Gras — he sips a Miller Lite through a straw.

LeJeune, 44, hasn't missed the Church Point Courir de Mardi Gras in 26 years.

"It's just so much fun," said LeJeune. "I'm trying to encourage younger people (to join in) because this is a traditional thing, and we got to keep it going."

This year, more than 300 men participated the Church Point Courir de Mardi Gras.

Every year, on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, men and boys of all ages dress in costumes and ride in a procession across the Cajun prairie from farm to farm. The men beg for money or ingredients to concoct a communal gumbo for a party at the end of the day.

Of course, it's more than a run to get something for supper. The Courir de Mardi Gras has its origins in medieval Europe.

In Church Point, some participate because it is a part of a long-standing family tradition. Some wear costumes sewn by their grandmothers, or wear costumes in the likeness of those worn by their fathers and grandfathers. Newcomers say they participate because they see the men-only event as an important part of Cajun culture.

And others said simply that it's a hell of a party before Lent begins.

The Capitaine always leads the procession through the countryside on horseback. This year, Capitaine Elton "Joey" Richard Jr. and five co-capitaines led the group.

Richard's father was Capitaine of the first Church Point Courir in 1961.

When they arrive at a farm, Richard asks the owner if he is "ready for some Mardi Gras" as the procession of men is known. Sometimes he may ask in French if the farmer would mind "some ugly Mardi Gras faces."

If a farmer agrees, the Capitaine asks his band of revelers to dance. Fortunately, the entourage is a moving party that includes a trailer with a drummer and a keyboardist who pump out the theme song for the event — the Dance de Mardi Gras. One man dressed as a clown had his own rub-board, another had a accordion and one masked parti er roamed the field playing a triangle.

Most continue to drink beer, which is included in the $20 entry fee.

Chickens are set free and while some men leap fences and make running dives to catch a chicken, other men pull wide-eyed children onto their shoulders and dance. Other revelers pluck women from the crowd for a two-step. A local doctor dances standing on top of his horse.

A 17-year-old named Philip Ladibais proudly catches one of the chickens. It's his first Mardi Gras.

"It's a rite of passage," said Todd Richard, who has participated in the event in years his. "When you turn 15 or 16 years old, your daddy lets you ride in the Mardi Gras and then you come home and you feel it for the next three days."

Richard and his family let the men chase down chickens in their yard on the Oliver Highway. He let about 200 people — both friends and strangers — watch from his yard.

Folklorists say the costumes and hats worn by the men were meant to ridicule the ruling class in 14th- and 15th-century France where the Courir tradition originated. A mortar-board-type hat was designed to poke fun at scholars and bishops.

Much of the tradition is about mockery, and parts of the modern-day procession are designed to be politically incorrect.

One raunchy reveler with a rubber doll explains to a crowd that the reveler is his intern and that the whole impeachment affair has "left a bad taste in her mouth."

No one can recall a black person participating in the Courir.

Standing among men with plastic derrieres exposed, and others in sombreros with faces painted green, Andrew Guidroz said he thinks the cultural and historical parts of the run make the community distinct.

A manager of information systems for a large local company, he said this is his third ride.

Standing in an elaborate red and black cone hat — or capuchon — and a shirt and pants tasseled with rags and bells, he said he wants others to know about such rich traditions. He has created a web site dedicated to such a purpose.


Twenty-three-year-old Smokey LaFosse has been participating in the Mardi Gras as long as he can remember.

Wearing a green satin outfit with yellow rag tassels and a matching capuchon, he said his outfit is identical to the one worn by his father and his father before him.

"My daddy don't ride no more. I carry it on," said LaFosse. "And my little boy, he meets us on the way. He's only 2. Hopefully in years to come, I can ride with him."