Celebrations mark St. Landry Parish Bicentennial

by Melanie Lee

St. Landry Parish will turn 200 years old on March 31, and that's plenty enough reason to celebrate! As the countdown unfolds, the St. Landry Parish Bicentennial Committee is organizing an unforgettable celebration.

"The Bicentennial celebration is an opportunity for all of us to become more aware of the history of our wonderful parish, and to let others know how proud we are of where we have been and where we are going," said Bicentennial Committee member Judy Romero.

"It's a rare opportunity that comes along once in a lifetime," added committee member Lee Hampton, "so, I think it's a great privilege and a great opportunity to celebrate this milestone."

In 1807, four years after the Louisiana Purchase, the elected legislative council passed an act that divided the Territory of Orleans into 19 parishes, with St. Landry being the 18th parish. This reflects the strong religious heritage in what would be the Spanish borderlands.

From 1807 to 1840, St. Landry Parish was known as Imperial St. Landry and consisted of present day St. Landry Parish, as well as the parishes of Calcasieu, Allen, Beauregard, Cameron, Jefferson Davis, Acadia and Evangeline.

The public is encouraged to take part in the Bicentennial Celebration scheduled for Saturday, March 31, beginning with a complimentary bicentennial breakfast of gush-gush (a once popular staple consisting of fried corn meal usually topped with syrup or preserves).

After the breakfast, a formal ceremony acknowledging the 200th anniversary of St. Landry Parish will take place on the front steps of the Courthouse. State leaders, local officials, and delegates from parishes that originated from St. Landry Parish are among those invited to take part in the formal ceremony.

Following the ceremony, the public will have the opportunity to view archived and noteworthy documents, as well as cultural exhibits, spanning 200 years of rich history in the parish. One of the main activities of the celebration, however, will be historical re-enactment tours, where actors will portray significant individuals of the past. Some of the individuals being portrayed include Gov. Jacque Dupré, an Opelousas native who not only
served as state representative and senator, but also served as Acting Governor for Louisiana in 1831; Manon Baldwin, a free woman of color who purchased and owned the old post office building on the corner of Court and Landry Streets, where she ran a successful tavern; and Sister Josephine, who became the first black Mother Superior nun under the Second Chapter to serve New Orleans. The tour also will include two descendants of Orphan Train Riders who traveled to St. Landry Parish during the Great Orphan Train Movement.

"The idea of being able to witness the bicentennial celebration is an awesome tribute to our community," said Bicentennial Committee member Yvonne Normand. "The visitors will have the opportunity to view reenactments of historical figures and learn how these individuals helped to shape history."

The event also will feature food, music and art booths. A variety of agencies and organizations from around the parish have been invited to take part in the bicentennial. So far, the bicentennial will be a prominent part of the Sunset Herb Fest, the Arnaudville Étoufée Festival, the Yambilee Festival, and the upcoming Opelousas-St. Landry Chamber of Commerce Annual Awards Banquet.

As a legacy, Bicentennial planners have proposed resurrecting a fountain or statue on the Courthouse Square commemorating the 200-year anniversary of St. Landry Parish.

"I think what it'll be is something that everybody who has any connection to St. Landry Parish will have an interest in," said Normand.

For further details about the St. Landry Parish Bicentennial Celebration, please contact Melanie Lee at St. Landry Parish Government at (337) 948-3688 or Roma Dominick-Stewart at (337) 594-3143.