Colfax celebrates pecans with truly 'sweet' festival

By CYNTHIA V. CAMPBELL

Pecans add a special American flavor to Louisiana cooking. Somehow, life wouldn't be quite right without sugary pecan pralines, pecan pie and pecan-topped sweet potato casseroles.

While Louisiana can't claim proprietary rights on Southern pecan cookery, it can claim one of the biggest pecan festivals in the country. The Louisiana Pecan Festival in Colfax in Grant Parish is one of the "sweetest" deals around.

Scheduled Friday-Sunday, Nov. 5-7, this year's festival will offer everything from pecan pies to pecan earrings. The family-oriented event fills the streets of Colfax.

A small town in the center of Grant Parish, Colfax is the parish seat. It was named after Schuyler Colfax, a leading member of the radical wing of the Republican party who served as Ulysses S. Grant's vice president from 1869 to 1873. One of Louisiana's Reconstruction parishes, Grant was named after the president.

Today, the town's population of about 2,000 swells during the festival, which spreads across the town from end to end.

"This is a very small town," said Fran Demers, publisher and editor of The Chronicle. "You can't get lost in Colfax."

The festival started in 1969, partly to celebrate the town's 100th anniversary. "It just grew and grew and grew," said Demers. "We have a country store that sells homemade syrup and jams and jellies. Women from around the parish bake hundreds of pecan pies. The store has one whole shelf of pecan pies."

Activities will start Friday, Nov. 5 at 7:45 a.m. with a blessing of the crops. Booths and shops opening at 8 a.m. include the Pecan House where people can buy packaged pecans.

The day will be designated as "children's day," and parish schoolchildren will be given a holiday to attend the festival.

Activities include cooking contests and costume contests. The Pecan Festival queen and her court will be presented at noon, and the Pecanettes, a teen girls' dance group, will perform.

The festival opens at 8 a.m. Saturday, and a large parade will start at 10 a.m. "We have groups here like Mardi Gras krewes in New Orleans," said Demers. "They are pecan krewes and they throw out candy to the crowds."

Saturday visitors can view the antique car show and the art show, which will feature quilts this year.

There will be live music, a karaoke contest and fireworks at 7 p.m.

Sunday is designated as family day. The festival opens at 1 p.m. following church services. There will be a black powder shoot and gospel music in the afternoon.

The festival also will feature carnival rides and numerous food booths, including everything from fried alligator to onion blossoms.

"This is really a family-oriented festival," said Demers. "People come back home during the festival. It's a reunion week for a lot of families."

Hundreds of volunteers make this festival work. "They cook pies and jams ahead of the festival," said Demers. "They are the heart of the festival. It's a tribute to the quality of people we have in Grant Parish."

To reach Colfax, follow I-49 north of Alexandria and take the La. 8 exit to Colfax. The highway through town is closed during the festival. People can park wherever they want, but are requested to respect the lawns of local residents.

"Nothing's more than six blocks away," said Demers.

For information, call the Louisiana Pecan Festival office, (318) 627-5196.