Evangeline Oak Park Ranger Elaine Delahoussaye, center, tells the story of the Acadian Memorial in St. Martinville to Lois Miller, Lillian LaFleur and Elsie Arceneaux. See page 9A for more on research about the Cajuns.

Acadian reunion begins later this month across area

Ron DeHomme
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE—The second World Acadian Congress of this century begins July 20 with more than 200 events planned throughout Acadiana. But the world reunion of thousands of Acadian descendants remains a mystery to many in Acadiana.

"I've been living here 20 years and I say I'm from here, but I don't know what's going on," said a downtown office worker who said she was just passing along a friend. "What's all this about?"

Don't worry. It's just a family reunion. The organizers of Congress Mondial Acadien have put together a weeklong event to celebrate the Acadian heritage and help coordinate 56 family reunions involving more than 60 families of Acadian descent. If the word isn't out yet, it will be soon. It's still a family thing.

"Congress was a concept for so long and people ask what is that and what will it do?" said Valdrin Buay with the Lafayette-based CMA, the non-profit organization for the event. "People ask, 'Am I an Acadian?' or 'Am I French?' or 'What does that mean?'

The answer comes July 17 to Aug. 15 as events from Marksville to Lake Charles to Houma during the largest gathering of Acadians since the diaspora of 1715.

The second World Acadian Congress is important to Acadians because their story is only now gaining the awareness they say it deserves, said UL professor and author Carl Brashear.

"There's nothing much about the Cajuns experienced even in Louisiana history textbooks," he said last year at the unveiling of a 36-foot bronze statue at the Acadian Memorial in St. Martinville.

The plaque held the names of 3,000 Acadians who were among the first settlers of today's Acadiana.

"As a result, the man on the street knows little about our background. This the Congress will change that," Brashear added.

The Acadians sailed, trekked and walked to Louisiana from the Canadian provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, known as the Maritimes. They came by way of France, the Caribbean and most points in between after being driven from their homelands by the British in 1739. They and their ancestors had occupied the land for 328 years.

The Acadians were separated and loaded onto separate boats. Their children were often on a third vessel. They began trickling into Louisiana in 1768, 18 years after the drama began.

More than half a million Acadian descendants live in Louisiana, according to Judge Alan Babineaux, the honorary president of the CMA. For him, bringing thousands of them together with thousands more from Canada is just one more way toward reclaiming the ancestral self-identity stripped from them and bred out of generations of 18th and 19th-century Cajuns.

"They made fun of the way we talk," he told the audience at this week's launch of the CMA/USA songbook. "They made fun of my accent and I've been all over the world with it," Babineaux said. "I'm proud to be an American, too, and how many Americans can express themselves in two languages?"

After many Cajuns attended the first World Acadian Congress in New Brunswick in 1996, the idea to play host a similar event in Acadiana emerged simultaneously to many of them. They began planning and organizing almost before they got back.
Together
from the first World Acadian Congress.

The first Congress was in 1934 in New Brunswick and attended more than 260,000 people. Nearly 50 municipalities of the original Acadians who may have been here are five years from the select. Every Acadian neighborhood has a history.

This second World Acadian Congress is in part of Francophone, Louisiana, official celebration of the return of French influence in Louisiana.

The CMA office has been processed through all the family associations, and a number of organizations, including the Congress, held reunions at locations throughout the state, including the Cheevy and the Acadian Society Congress de Monde (ACSM). The World Community for the Acadians is another big picture, which Roy calls a "donor of Oddities and Anecdotes."

Roy's wife, Louise, living in Texas, told her co-workers about Congress in the newspapers there.

"They have our names here and asked me how you say that crazy-name word," said Candy Dugas, who now lives in Las Vegas, Nevada. "It's easy now. It's "Crazy."" So now they're all trying to talk "Crazy.""

According to Bertie Common, the associate director of CMA, more than 80 municipalities have been involved, not counting the 500,000 people.

"We'll have 17 days of coverage on Radio Canada," Common said. "We had two months of coverage here from Canada doing sessions for 20 weeks. That's unbelievable."

Another former resident of Lafeyette asked how she could get the recently released official Congress theme song.

"My son, "Tendidun," is big here," Bertha Jones said from her home on Acadia Island near St. Augliwit, Fla. "About, we heard about him before."

Tendidun's Congress song was released March 9, was released in New York. Roy said it is now the most requested song on the largest FM station in the Maritime provinces.

The launch of the Congress theme song is important because it's the first tangible evidence that the Congress is going to happen, the CMA official said.

"We had a number of people coming there new 740 people coming through the Congress of the Acadians," Roy said. "Maybe between 20,000 will be coming from Canada, but it's still hard to know. Even after Congress it will be hard to know."

The coordinator for reunions one of the Acadian States is Verge Collins of Nova Scotia, who co-wrote the Congress theme song Richard Scott of the Acadian Federation was the coordinator and was the coordinator of the Congress.

"Held of the Acadian states, knowing the other states the Acadians have gone through because of the depression, and their coming together and meeting people where Acadians have had some experience gives us a great deal of hope," Richilson said.

(For more information about the Congress, contact the 1994 Acadian Congress office at 314-547; or the Web site at www.cma-acoa.com.)