Tulane graduate student has studied Crawfish Festival

by Marcelle Bienvenu

Did you know that there are other places in the world that have celebrations and festivals much like we have in South Louisiana? And here I thought we were unique. Now, they may not have yams or sugarcane, or andouille or jambalaya, but they, too, have harvest celebrations and food and cultural fests.

But Marjorie Esman, a graduate student at Tulane University in New Orleans and a native New Yorker knew it, and decided to spend some time in South Louisiana to study our festivals and make some comparisons. In fact, her dissertation will be on Louisiana festivals and especially the Crawfish Festival.

Esman has been residing in Breaux Bridge for close to a year, attending Crawfish Festival Association meetings and functions and foraying out to neighboring towns and cities partaking of the many celebrations throughout the year.

Buy why Breaux Bridge?

"For several reasons," replies Esman. "I began my research in 1976 by writing all of the festival associations requesting pertinent information, such as when did they begin, where were they located, what was the purpose of the celebration, that kind of thing," she explains.

"Then I plotted the towns on a map. It was then that I noticed the Crawfish Festival was centrally located geographically. Then upon further study, I realized it was also the festival that was the cutoff between the harvest and the newer ethnic festivals."

Buy yet another factor led her to finally choose Breaux Bridge as her headquarters. . .

"I was acquainted with Michael Reese, who had studied anthropology at Tulane and was a native of Breaux Bridge. I called him on the telephone to get some ideas from him. It so happened it was right before the Crawfish Festival and he invited me to join them for the festival. I did and a year later, I moved myself here," she explains.

During the past year she has lived among us, tasted our food, seen our traditions and studied our habits. "I've come to realize that there is a new focus on Acadian identity. The people here realize that they are unique and have a reputation to live up to. With these festivals they are simply reinforcing what they are all about publicly. Since the mid-1960s, the Acadian Culture is a marketable commodity," says Esman.

"The Crawfish Festival is different from most. It's bigger, livelier and the local people become quite involved and enthused. And it commemorates a product that is quite popular."

Her year is up and now it's time to put all of this information together for her dissertation. I, for one, would like to see the finished product.

Marjorie Esman (right) and Max Nargassans discuss Breaux Bridge's history and its close ties to the Crawfish Festival. Esman has spent the past year in Breaux Bridge doing research for her doctoral dissertation on the history and development of festivals in Louisiana, with emphasis on the Crawfish Festival. (Staff Photo)