Cultural Centers maintain memories

If you want to look back at the Acadian and Creole past of the area, there are many opportunities—not the least of which are Vermilionville and Acadian Village here, and the soon-to-be opened Jean Lafitte cultural center.

Vermilionville, on Surrey St., is a not-for-profit commemorative center of living history. Its purpose is to preserve and portray the elements of folk life of the cultures that settled the Lafayette area between 1765 and 1890.

Here you will find on display the food, crafts and lifestyle of early Acadiana, including authentic and recreated homes and buildings of the era.

It was designed to be "a facility that connects all facets of Acadian and Creole life and beyond—including elements of the American experience and the native American experience," according to its developers.

The Jean Lafitte Cultural Center, adjacent to Vermilionville, will open March 29. The two main attractions will be a movie on the history and origin of the Cajun people filmed in France and Canada, and a museum with displays on the food, lifestyle, economy, religion and music of the area.

The $2.5 million center includes a 150-seat full-size-screen movie theater.

The Jean Lafitte Center will be linked by a walking bridge across the small bayou that separates it from Vermilionville.

The Jean Lafitte Center is part of the National Historical Park and Preserve division of the National Parks Service. It is the third center in the Jean Lafitte system in Louisiana. The Mission Acadian Cultural Center in Eunice is part of the system, as is a center in the New Orleans area.

Acadian Village, located off Ridge Road, is a museum of Acadian heritage and culture, featuring a slice of life from 19th century south Louisiana.

Visitors who stroll through the well-kept village can leisurely step back in time in a serene setting, to a time and place where the pace of life was slower.

Acadian Village is not just a tourist attraction, however. Besides letting visitors glimpse the past, it serves another important function, according to its director, A.J. LeBlanc.

At the village, through the work of the Lafayette Association for Retarded Citizens, handicapped persons are trained and employed in grounds and garden maintenance, janitorial services, and retail store operations.

Visitors from out-of-town may not be aware of the role the village plays in providing handicapped citizens with the chance to become productive citizens. Instead, what they see is the Acadian culture, with emphasis on music, language, crafts and architecture.

Period homes of Acadian architecture have been restored and furnished with native Louisiana antiques.

Only three buildings at Acadian Village are replicas. The rest are authentic Acadian structures.

The Aurelie Bernard house, the oldest house in the village, was built around 1800 and added onto in 1840. The house was used for a scene in the movie Belizaire the Cajun.

The oldest section of the home contains an exhibit on Cajun music. There, visitors can see traditional Cajun instruments and the first recording of Acadian music, pressed in 1928.

The Thibodeaux house, another home at the village, was built from hand-hewn timbers about 1820. It features a garconniere, an attic or loft where the boys of the family slept. The attic is only accessible by an outside staircase which made it easier for the youngsters to sneak into the house after a late night fais-do-do, as the dances were called.

Other features of the village include a pavilion where Acadian Village stages its musical competition, dances and receptions; and a swamp recreated to show the swamps the Acadians crossed to arrive in the Attakapas prairie region.