Dancing priest, 74, sashays across south La.

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Advocate correspondent

LAFAYETTE — The Rev. John Henry Millet isn’t spending his leisure years in a rocking chair; he’s wearing out the dance floors and the roads of southern Louisiana.

The 74-year-old semi-retired Jesuit priest dances every night of the week, collects stamps and rocks, and makes weekly trips to towns throughout southern Louisiana adding to his collections.

Saturday, Sunday and Monday nights his blue Honda Sprint rolls into the parking lot at Randol’s. Five minutes later he’s two-stepping and waltzing across the dance floor.

His interest in Cajun dancing began last March after he two-stepped with a “really good partner.”

“I’d been through two classes before that but didn’t get into it,” Millet says, adding — with a mischievous twinkle in his brown eyes and a wide grin on his round, lined face — that one of his partners had “two posts for feet.”

A former high school teacher, Millet learned dancing with the idea of teaching.

“In one night, I taught four youngsters how to two-step and waltz,” he says. “When the night ended, they were good dancers.”

Another motivation for dancing was a need for exercise. Preceding Millet’s excursions to Randol’s was a trip to the hospital, where he underwent double bypass surgery.

Millet, who is 5-foot, 6-inches tall, says he “stands up straight,” isn’t intimidated by taller dancing partners.

“You just have to raise your hand higher for the lady to go under,” he says.

Suzanne Pomerene, a taller partner, feels he has a lot of pep and “does well for a beginner.”

Millet’s favorite avocation is square dancing, and four nights a week he’s answering the call of do-si-do. A member of the See-Sawers in Lafayette, he dances with the caller’s wife and five widowed club members.

He also spends time on dance floors in Abbeville and New Iberia, sashaying with more widows.

“He never misses a step,” says Sherry Burnum, wife of caller “Chuck” Burnum. “He’s a smooth dancer, and I think square dancing keeps him young.”

Burnum added that she thinks Father Millet is an inspiration in that he is an elderly priest who not only dances but dances well.

“I think it’s amazing that a man his age can still do the things he does.”

Millet’s hobby began in 1961 during his stint as an assistant pastor at Key West, Fla.

“The pastor bowled, and another priest was a golfer,” he says. “I needed a hobby, so I decided to square dance, and I’ve been doing it ever since.”

Millet hasn’t missed a National Square Dancing Convention since he started dancing and plans to attend one set for June in Memphis.

Millet, who always dons his habit except for dancing, attributes his hobby with an “I like square dancing” sticker on his car bumper. A barrel

SEE PRIEST, 5D

The Rev. John Millet, a semi-retired Jesuit priest, dances at Randol’s in Lafayette with Emily Simon of Youngsville, whose husband is in the band.

Priest

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flying from his radio antenna “says nothing but helps me find my car in a parking lot,” he says.

Millet’s other hobby is collecting.

In 1967, while serving as chaplain at Lafayette Charity Hospital, Millet initiated a fund to help support Jesuit seminarians at the St. Charles College in Grand Coteau. In the 23 years since its inception, the fund has accumulated $66,000.

He raises money for the fund by collecting and selling aluminum cans, newspapers, and duck and postage stamps. Millet recently moved to New York, where he sold his collection of duck stamps for $11,500.

The Rev. Thomas Madden, superior of the Jesuits at St. Charles College, said the funds raised by Millet assist the seminarians with their living expenses.

“With him it’s a special personal enterprise,” Madden said. “I believe, also that he sees it as a useful, profitable service to the Jesuits.”

Every Wednesday he travels throughout southern Louisiana adding to his collections, which contain more than a million stamps. The Jesuit acquires duck stamps from courthouses and sheriff’s departments and from individuals who answer request posters he places in barber shop windows.

His postage stamps, dating back to 1947, are collected from utility and gas company personnel, who give him stamped envelopes received from customers. Sometimes he spends an eight-hour workday soaking the envelopes and removing the stamps.

He’s proud of having 1,700 stamps commemorating the Apollo space mission and 1,500 W.C. Handy issues commemorating the birth of the blues.

When the soaking is completed, possibly next month, the collection will be submitted to bidders and sold.

Millet also has a collection of about 1,000 rocks including samples of gold, silver and copper. His rock interest began in 1976, and in the 1980s he acquired jewelry-making equipment.

“When I get all of my stamps soaked I may make jewelry,” he says.

Born in Dallas to a Swiss baker, Millet came to Louisiana in 1933 to study for the priesthood at Grand Coteau. After graduation, he pastored Christ the King in the Jesuit community.

His other offices include a four-year pastorate in New Orleans, 11 years in Bath, N.Y., and five years at Lafayette Charity Hospital as chaplain.

“I’ve seen so many priests retire with nothing to do, but not me. I’m always going to have a couple of hobbies,” he says. “I have no excuses. I’m me, and that’s it.”