Acadians honor past on Day of Remembrance

By Jean-Paul Fonte

Acadians recently gathered Sunday in St. Martinville at the town's Acadian Memorial to remember their ancestors and the trials they endured as part of the World-wide Day of Remembrance.

Worldwide Day of Remembrance occurs every July 24, the anniversary of the Acadians' expulsion from Nova Scotia in 1755, which is often called Le Grand Département. Queen Elizabeth II of England made a formal apology for the eviction of the Acadians in 2005 and instilled the somber occasion.

"Today is a day when we pause and remember the suffering, the exile and the hardships that our Acadian ancestors went through after being kicked out of their homes in Nova Scotia," said Ralph Melancon, a member of the St. Martinville Acadian Memorial Foundation's board.

Lafayette Parish School Board member Kermit Bouillon likened the sufferings the Acadians endured to the similar plight of African slaves experienced as they were brought to America.

"Women and children were separated from each other. Men were separated from their wives. Sisters were separated from their brothers," said Bouillon.

"They were sent on ships. You either survived or died."

Christy Dupuis Marais spoke Sunday of her Cajun upbringing in St. Martinville that inspired her to find out more about her forefathers who arrived as part of Le Grand Département when the Acadians were expelled from Nova Scotia.

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Maraist recognized for efforts to create memorial

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Maraist said all her work toward preserving and cultivating Cajun culture was aimed at making sure the Acadian people were "memorialized in a fitting way."

It was through her efforts that the memorial was able to create an interactive mural that tells the story of a some of the Acadians who arrived in Louisiana, giving modern Cajuns a chance to connect with their ancestors through history. She also worked to obtain blueprints of a cross called the Deportation Cross and erect it in a garden along the Bayou Teche.

But, she said, stands at the location where the Acadians were expelled from Nova Scotia.

"There's one where the Acadians began their exile and one where they found a new life here in Louisiana," she said. "It's kind of complete their journey."

Another monument adorning the south wall of the memorial recounts all the known names of the people who arrived in Louisiana from Le Grand Département. Inscribed on the sides are words that call all the louder to those who visited Sunday as part of the Worldwide Day of Remembrance.

Marais is a descendant of two Cajun families -- the Dougas and the LeBlancs -- who arrived in Louisiana after Le Grand Département.

For her efforts, she was inducted into the Acadian Museum of Erath's Order of Living Legends.

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Interpreting an Odyssey

Attendees of the Worldwide Day of Remembrance event at St. Martinville's Acadian Memorial chanted about their Acadian roots while listening to the history of their forefathers as part of an interactive mural at the memorial.

Bouillon, representing the Acadian Museum of Erath where he volunteers, said he awaited the day that the Acadians' trials would gain the same recognition as the black slave trade gained in the 1790s through the mini-series "Roots."

"That miniseries in the 1970s really changed the view Americans had of black people in America," he said.

"What's different from that story than what happened to the Acadians in Nova Scotia?"

"Although the national recognition is not currently what Bouillon would like, the event also recognized one woman who continues to work toward that goal."

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"Acadian Memorial, St. Martinville, La."

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