Acadian ‘Fais-dodo’ Was Conducive to Romance

By Mary Alien Fontenot

EDI: Mrs. Fontenot, former area editor of the Opelousas Daily World, is the author of the award-winning children’s series, “Chevis Crawfish” and also the recently-published “The Cat and St. Landry.”

One of the happier aspects of Acadian folk ways is the community dance, or “fais-dodo,” so called because these words, which mean “go to sleep,” were sung to the young children who were brought to the dance along with all other members of the family. These “fais-dodo” dances were conducive to romance, since the dances were practically the only social occasions where the carefully sheltered Acadian girls could meet boys who might become their future husbands.

The dance-loving Acadian began their “fais-dodo” tradition in southwest Louisiana as soon as the memory of their cruel exile from Nova Scotia (1756) began to fade. At first, the dances were held in the homes. Musicians were no problem—practically every family boasted a “by ear” musician—a son or a brother who could play the old songs on the French accordion, a cousin or “beau-frère” who could accompany on the violin. And anyone—even a mother-in-law—could produce a foot stomping rhythm on the banjo, a primitive, homemade instrument known as the “priti fer,” little iron.

The dance began early and ended late. Babies and young children were put to sleep on pallets along the walls of the room cleared for dancing, and the watchful eye on the sleeping children as well as the older daughters out on the dance floor. But “maman” couldn’t hear the whispered words and interchange of small nothings that were going on between the dancing couple. Careful to preserve proper decorum, nonetheless there were opportunities for a quick exchange of warm glances, a lingering (continued on Page 5)

Distribution of hands—the little private communications that constitute the language of love.

The “fais-dodo” was usually held on Saturday night. The custom still survives, in a somewhat modified form, in most predominantly Acadian communities of south Louisiana.