FrancoFête ‘99: The Louisiana Tricentennial

Year-long birthday party to attract millions of visitors to the Bayou State

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LAFAYETTE — Happy birthday, Louisiana! You're 300 years young — and it'll take an entire year to blow out all those candles.

From the Mississippi to the Texas border, from Arkansas to the Gulf of Mexico, the largest tourism initiative in the state's history gets under way today. FrancoFête '99: The Louisiana Tricentennial is a year-long commemoration of the French establishment of the first permanent colony in the Louisiana Territory. On Mardi Gras Day, March 2, 1699, Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, founded a military outpost named Pointe Mardi Gras at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Louisiana has been celebrating ever since, and FrancoFête '99 honors this founding and the 300 subsequent years of Francophone influence in Louisiana.

Anchoring the birthday party will be Congres Mondial Acadien — the World Acadian Congress — set for July 31 to Aug. 15. At least 44 family reunions are planned, uniting Cajuns with their Acadian and French cousins from around the world. More than 1 million Louisiana residents can claim Acadian or French-Creole ancestry, making Louisiana Cajun capital of the world. FrancoFête '99 is more than Cajun, says Phillip Jones, head of the state Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism. “We want to honor and expand upon our very distinctive heritage,” Jones said. “Louisiana is a very desirable destination, not only for Americans but for a significant portion of the world’s 100 million French-speaking citizens.” More than 600 events, festivals and special events will be showcased during the year, each with a French twist. A major event is scheduled at the New Orleans Museum of Art May 1 to Aug. 31, “Degas in New Orleans — an Impressionist Painter in America.” The exhibit will feature paintings completed by Degas while he was living in New Orleans.

International interest in FrancoFête '99 may have peaked long before most Louisianans got wind of the idea. Journalists...
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and photographers from around the world are getting a good dose of Cajun-style schmoozing from N’awlins to St. Martinville.

So many articles have appeared in European newspapers and magazines about South Louisiana’s unique culture that Bruce Morgan, the director of communications for the Louisiana Office of Tourism, doesn’t have time anymore to read them all.

And St. Martinville Mayor Eric Martin, when shown a two-page spread on the Romero brothers that appeared in the winter issue of France magazine, the official publication of the French Embassy in Washington, D.C., said he’s seen so many articles lately it’s not really news to him — or to the Romero brothers.

Their favorite picture is the one of them and Cardinal Pio Laghi that was in a local paper,” Martin said. “They’re proud of that one the most — they said their relatives are probably looking at it in their graves.”

But Cajun and Creole pride have for years been emerging from the swamp of shame that, at its depth, found Cajuns calling themselves “coons-asses.”

“arthritis wealthier and more worldly cousins, the French Creoles, descendants of French colonial settlers in America, also found it necessary to shun their mother tongue,” writes Kathy Bishop in France magazine. “To this class-conscious group, originally a mix of friends of King Louis XIV, soldiers and fortune seekers, speaking French signified the inability to become fully American, a prerequisite to true social ‘arrival’ in the New World.”

Needless to say, that’s all changed. Cajun is way cool, and middle-aged men and women rue the days when their parents and grandparents refused to speak French in front of them, when the Sisters rapped little knuckles at the least French utterance. But in 30 years, thanks largely to the efforts of CODOFIL, being Cajun has gone from being a source of shame to a source of great pride.

FrancoFête ’99 is expected to translate that pride into about 28 million visitors and $8 billion in revenue. Everyone is polishing their Gallic roots and getting ready to party, Jones said.

“This celebration will be a wonderful opportunity to promote Louisiana and educate our citizens and visitors, nationally and internationally,” he said.

On the Internet:

For free tour guides and information on almost 900 FrancoFête ’99 events, call 1-800-44GUMBO or visit the Web site at www.louisianatravel.com.