Gaspard unfolding mystery of Acadian genealogy

By Becky Tillson

The story of Acadian culture unfolds like a mystery novel of epic proportions but in this novel, the story and the characters are the same.

To find the plot is to follow the clues found in the movements of generations of people whose wanderings stopped in Louisiana.

For Russell Gaspard, Clerk of Court in Vermilion Parish, that is where the story of Acadian genealogy begins — in Louisiana.

But the ultimate goal of his genealogy project is a world map tracing the paths of those European expatriates who can be tracked by the names familiar to Acadiana.

"Truhan, LeBlanc, Legers, Thibodeauxs, DeJacois, Landry, Boudreauxs — all those names we’re finding ancestry for, some that go back to the 1300s," Gaspard said. "We have more than 180,000 names linked to families.

The project to create a computer data base of Acadian genealogy here is linked with another such project in Canada organized by genealogist Stephen White of Moncton University.

Together, the long-term goal is a complete story on a computer data base of the Acadians’ dispersal and subsequent relocations.

But a more pressing short-term goal currently drives a large group of locals who have become involved in Gaspard’s side of the project — the first World Congress of Acadians to be held Aug. 10-22 in New Brunswick.

Organizers expect at least 200,000 Acadians to gather there for Retrouvailles ’94, a variety of “reunions” between Canadian and Cajun descendants connected by a familiar name.

This is where it gets complicated. The genealogy tracker needs help boots here because the going gets a little deep.

Spontaneous name changes among descendants from the Nova Scotia clans have genealogists searching for family members who may share family ties without sharing the same last name.

So, in Canada some family reunions are planned in which, for example, the Thibodeauxs of New Brunswick will host the Breasseaus of the world and the Legers will host some Truhan.

The monumental connections made at these reunions should help genealogists find what became of a whole host of descendants shared by families in two countries.

From this information, work begins again on a new chapter of the genealogy project aiming for a celebration in 2001 of the 400th anniversary of the Acadians landing in Nova Scotia from France.

The summit planned for 2001 will be both a culmination and a launching pad for a network of Acadian cultures around the world, according to Gaspard.

“One really interesting thing about all this is that there will probably be a second world congress of Acadians in 2000 to see where we have gotten and to prepare for 2001,” he said.

“It will probably be held right here in Acadiana.”

Along with hundreds of local volunteers, help from USL’s Center for Louisiana Studies is crucial to the developing project.

“We’re hoping to start a world genealogical society,” Gaspard said. “As complete as possible genealogy is the long-term goal. We hope to have data centers linked by computer around the world.

“The story that comes out of that will be something for Ted Turner’s television,” he added. “This story can rival anything on film.”