Lafayette historian helps preserve bits of past

By MARILYN HUDSON
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LAFAYETTE — When Norman Heard was a boy, his grandparents told him about their lives on the American frontier. "They liked to talk about it, and I liked to listen," he says.

He never outgrew his childhood fascination with cowboys and Indians, and this summer his efforts to preserve the relics of frontier life will produce a museum at Acadian Village.

For the past two years, Heard has searched museums in Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi to find relics depicting life between the missionaries and Indians in the Mississippi valley from the 15th century until recent times.

A priceless canoe, at least 300 years old, will be among artifacts shown when the museum, dedicated to missionaries, opens this summer at Acadian Village.

"Our objective is to show the courage and dedication of missionaries who risked and sometimes gave their lives for the Indians," he says. "The museum ties in with our French heritage, and there is no other like it in the nation."

The canoe was unearthed by Department of Wildlife and Fisheries agents and is stored at the Rockefeller Refuge. The prize relic is 27 feet long and was constructed of cypress.

A set of 10 paintings by Robert Dafford, a local artist nationally known for his murals, will be included in the exhibit, and crosses carried by early Jesuits are expected to be shown.

Six display cases of relics, including Indian ceremonial objects and weapons, paintings, and correspondence between early missionaries also will be shown.

Heard, a co-founder of Acadian Village, will be volunteer museum curator.

His fascination with frontier life also has inspired several books spanning the historical period between Spanish exploration in 1528 and the Battle of Wounded Knee and the end of the frontier in 1890.

Volume I has been published, and the second is being printed. Heard is working on the third and expects to finish the five-volume set by 2000.

"At my age, you have to be an optimist to take on a five-volume set reference work," he says.

Heard began writing the first volume of his reference set when he retired from the faculty of the University of Southwestern Louisiana in 1981 after teaching 12 years.

Heard already has published six books, including "Bookman's Guide to the Americas" and "Hope through Doing," a volume about his three retarded children who live in group homes and work.

The J. Norman Heard Building, a 16-bed facility constructed in 1985, was named to honor his efforts in getting a $369,000 grant to build it.

Acadian Village, initiated in 1976, provides employment for some retarded people. Heard also founded the South Texas Habilitation Center and Valley Botanical Gardens in Texas, which also employs retarded people.

Other honors bestowed upon him include selection to represent Louisiana at the White House Conference on the Handicapped in 1977 and receipt of the President's Cup for Distinguished Service from the State Association for Retarded Citizens in 1976.