History talks back

Multimedia mural gives voice to ancestors

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ST. MARTINVILLE — Duffonia “Pete” Melancon of Lake Hillsdale, Miss., came to St. Martinville Friday for one reason—to remember his ancestors, who came to Louisiana from Acadia, Nova Scotia, more than 200 years ago.

Melancon and his wife, Madeline, stood beneath the Deportation Cross in the Memorial Garden behind the Acadian Memorial and said Friday’s observance of the National Day of the Acadian helped bring Pete Melancon’s ancestors to life.

Several dignitaries, including U.S. Rep. Billy Tauzin and St. Martinville Mayor Eric Martin, spoke to about 85 people in the memorial building. But for the Melancons, the high point was when Robert Dafford’s mural of Acadian exiles came to life. Dafford’s models for the mural were descendants of real Acadians, and each person in the picture was meant to portray a real person who was driven out of Canada by the British in 1755.

The wall-sized mural shows a large group of Acadians under oak trees in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia, just before they were told they were being deported. The mural was completed six years ago, but it came alive Friday when a spotlight was shown on individual faces in the painting, and a recorded voice told the story of what they may have experienced just before they were driven out.

The first to “speak” was father and son, shown embracing each other under one of the oaks, Joseph Semer and his son, Jean Baptiste Semer.

“I will take an oath; I will find you if we are separated,” said a voice as a spotlight shown on Jean Baptiste’s face in the painting. Then the voice

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of the father was heard, recalling the words of Col. Edward Winslow, who led the expulsion of the Acadians from their homes, promising them that families would not be separated. The promise was not kept.

"His majesty commands that your land and cattle, all will be forfeited to the crown ..." said the narrator.

Next, the spotlight moved to the face in the center of the painting, Joseph Broussard de Beausoleil.

"I never trusted des Anglais," the recording said.

"For six years we lived in the woods and led a militia against the British, but we eventually had to surrender. We were put into prisons and then put to work for the English farmers on land that had once been ours."

"Beausoleil" Broussard, as he came to be known, eventually led a large group of the former rebels south Louisiana from Santo Domingo in 1764. One of his band was Claude Martin, an ancestor of St. Martinville Mayor Eric Martin.

"He fought with Beausoleil and came back here and bought cattle," Martin said after the morning's program.

"Some came here for opportunity; some came to find brothers or sisters. There are thousands of stories of Evangeline and Gabriel. It happened all over. But the British were clever. They knew if they separated families they would look for each other and never come back to Canada."

The day's activities, which included live Cajun music and a lecture on genealogy by Lynn Louviere.

Brenda Comeaux Trahan, director of the memorial and curator of the Acadian Museum next door, said she recently realized what the observance meant to her:

"It's about pride in our survival," she said. "About a wonderful culture that survived — a nation that rekindled itself."