History unfolds at Acadian Memorial Festival

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ST. MARTINVILLE — “It’s a real sweet, personal festival,” said Elaine Clement. “It’s just a little bit of everything.”

Clement is referring to the 11th annual Acadian Memorial Heritage Festival and Wooden Boat Congrès, set for Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., in Evangeline Oak Park on the Bayou Teche.

And she would know because she’s the director and curator of the Acadian Memorial and, for that matter, she’s also director of tourism for St. Martinville.

“What I really like about the festival is that it’s got everything you have at all kinds of festivals,” Clement said. “It’s got food, music and crafts.”

And a lot more, too.

But first, for the past 11 years, the festival has had something in common with this year’s Le Grand Réveil Acadien — The Great Acadian Awakening — set to climax in October, and accordingly, gives that event its due.

“We do a reenactment of the arrival of the Acadians every year,” said Clement. “This year, just in general, the whole festival is dedicated to the 250th arrival of the Acadians here. There’s not a particular new event we’re going to do since we already do the reenactment.”

The festival schedule has the reenactment of the Acadians’ arrival, in what became

See FESTIVAL Page 7A

Festival

Continued from Page 3A

known as the Attakapas region, and will include members of the Guilbeau and Sonnier families. And welcoming them to the banks of the Teche will be members of Louisiana Native American tribes, as well as la Compagnie Franche Troupe de la Marine, the royal French peacekeeping force in North America.

Also on tap is the parade of wooden boats, similar to those that might have been used by the Acadians 250 years ago; French theater, Cajun music with La Recolte, a film, traditional round dances, and of course food and drink.

Clement sees similarities to the Acadian Memorial Heritage Festival Festival International de Louisiane in its early days.

“It wasn’t just an event. People were hanging out together,” recalled Clement. “The groups who weren’t on stage were in the streets dancing and in the clubs playing and it was very much a personal experience.

“And that’s kind of what this is,” Clement continued. “There’s a lot of little pieces. It’s a place where you can come learn about something, be a part of something, meet people from elsewhere and from here.”

Still, as a festival there’s an underlying bitter sweet historic theme. “People come here and cry and that’s a great thing. They cry for my people. They cry for what happened to their people,” she said. “You can celebrate and be sad side by side.

“Everybody’s got a history. This is our particular one. You can come learn about it,” said Clement. “And it is a celebration. I’m just convinced that what happens, happens. And so that we learn about it and learn from it is what’s important to me. That we use it as a learning opportunity.

“But this is definitely a celebration because it’s pretty darn cool that these people have been here for 250 years and have had such a major impact on the culture,” Clement said. “We kind of like to think that everybody’s celebrating.”

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page 3A col. 4

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