Parish horsemen thrill Belgian audiences

By PAUL KEDINGER
Editor

"Our visit created as much curiosity and interest," says Gerald Fontenot about the Tournoi and cowboy demonstrations staged at the 5th annual Foire de Libramont that the Ville Platte riders have been asked to put on similar demonstrations in England, France and the Flemish section of Belgium.

Fontenot, accompanied by Keith Guillory, Mitch Soléau, brothers Barry and Donnie Fontenot, and Kent Saucier, proved to be the highlight of the prestigious Belgian State Fair July 24-27.

In a land where Western cowboys are television and film images and the local newspaper prints a full-color cowboy-theme comic strip, the six riders were truly performing stars for the agricultural fair.

"The people were quiet when we first entered the arena, because they didn't know what they would see," remembers Gerald Fontenot when he and the other riders first entered the football field sized open ring.

The foreign crowd's reaction however was decidedly more enthusiastic after the riders had demonstrated their roping, barrel racing, cattle-cutting techniques and performed a brief Torneo run.

"As they were hanging and bullfighting and throwing their hats into the air," Fontenot relates.

The Evangeline Parish cowboys performed before crowds estimated between 8,000 and 7,000 during the fair which attracted over 104,000 visitors during its four-day run. Fair officials told Fontenot that attendance at the twice daily shows "was the greatest turnout for a fair in a great country."

In a departure from the past, Foire de Libramont officials selected Louisianans as the guest of honor this year. The Louisiana invitation was the first one ever to an entity outside of Europe.

As the result of a down beat between Louisiana and Belgian towns over the past several years, Lt. Gov. Melinda Schwegmann's office and the City of Lafayette coordinated a Louisiana Pavilion during the agricultural fair. The pavilion contained a Cajun-Creole restaurant and other displays by organizations and firms displaying their Louisiana products and services, as well as an entertainment stage. Musicians, singers and dancers from the Lafayette area provided musical entertainment in the pavilion.

Ville Platte has been a twin city for Durbuy in Belgium, a connection established and fostered by Philippe Jarodt, who originally came to Evangeline Parish to teach French in parish schools.

Jarodt enlisted Gerald Fontenot's help in arranging the original training of Ville Platte and Durbuy and again turned to the past Tournoi champion and officer to coordinate efforts to bring the Tournoi and the cowboy rodeo events to Belgium.

The Belgian's fascination with cowboys was unbridled. Fontenot and the other cowboys were frequently asked to sell the cowboy shirts of their backs, as well as their cowboy hats, boots, ropes and spurs. Laughing fondly at the enthusiasm of the would-be cowboys, Fontenot says, "We could have sold a truckload of ropes. We could have sold boots, spurs, everything."

He remembers, "They all wanted to feel the ropes, see how it worked so they bought the leather used by the men during their demonstrations."

The thrill of seeing working cowboys prompted Barry and Donnie Fontenot and Keith Guillory to stage roping classes. For 10 francs, the Belgians received 10 minutes of instruction roping a plastic calf's head mounted on a bale of straw and received autographed posters showing roping activities.

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Keith Guillory eyes a Tournel ring as he prods his horse during a show performance for an appreciative crowd attending the Belgian agricultural fair.

Cajun cowboys

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They attracted large crowds around the horse stables. "We stayed five solid days at the fair, answering questions," says Fontenot.

"It's an experience we won't ever forget," says Fontenot, apparently echoing the sentiments of the others who attended the fair. "It was a once in a lifetime opportunity."

In addition to the riders and their wives, others from Ville Platte who traveled to Belgium included Mr. and Mrs. William R. Guillory, Mr. and Mrs. Leland Vidrine, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Lee Soileau, Mr. and Mrs. Gary Landreneau, Mr. and Mrs. Frankie LeBas, Mr. and Mrs. Don Roussell and Mr. and Mrs. Johnny LeBlanc.

Ville Platte's cowboys may be traveling again in the future, according to Fontenot. He admits the idea of performing in England "is being considered."

Viva, le cowboy!

SALUTING THE CROWD - Donovan Fontenot waves to the Belgian crowd while Mitch Soileau reins in his horse.