Preserving tradition

Fontenot shares lore of Acadians

By GWEN BROUSSARD
news editor

ERATH – The Acadians who came to Louisiana in the late 1700s were not too different from the Cajuns of today – they faced many hardships but knew how to create their own diversions to forget their problems.

Some of those diversions have been lost in today’s society, says Ruth Fontenot, who presented Friday’s installment of Living Traditions of Vermilion Parish at the Cafe’ du Musee’ next to the Acadian Museum in Erath.

The Acadians began immigrating to Louisiana after they were exiled from Nova Scotia. The Spanish wanted them here and lured them with offers of land. They also gave the Acadian families a cow, calf, rooster and hen, Fontenot said. Then they told them, “Good...” (See ACADIANS, Page 3A)
“What were they faced with when they got here?” Fontenot asked. “Woods, alligators and mosquitoes.

“They started building their homes. Not knowing Louisiana’s climate, they built similar to the homes in Nova Scotia where it was cold and snowed, with real steep roofs.”

In Nova Scotia, the attic was used to store food and seeds. Because of the heat here, the attic could not be used for that purpose. The Acadians also quickly learned that the grains they brought here from Nova Scotia would not grow well here.

“The Indians taught the Acadians how to survive, what the plant and eat. They also taught them how to preserve their food without a refrigerator.”

Fontenot used a model of a tree which she said the Indians taught the Acadians to hollow out for smoking their meat and fish.

The Acadians also had to deal with alligators and snakes in their homes.

“One thing the Acadians liked to do a lot, as a pastime, was to ‘veiller,’ Fontenot said. “They would go sit on the porch and gossip.

“To pass their boredom a lot of times, they would hold ‘un bal de maison.’

“Since the beginning of the Acadians, they were always a people faced with hardships, debts, hurricanes,” Fontenot said. “To get away from the bad, they started creating diversions like the bal de maison and festivals.”

Fontenot spent 20 years of her life on the road gathering the information she uses as part of her presentations. She said she would just sit and talk to people, writing down some of their stories and remembering the rest.

She also hand makes model Acadian homes and furniture. She uses the same woods the Acadians used - cypress, walnut and cherry - and, in fact, usually uses wood which was originally used to build the old Acadian homes, gathering it from old homes being torn down.