Museum director visits 200 cemeteries in state to document Civil War

By BOBBY ARDIN Special to The Advocate

OPELOUSAS — After visiting about 200 cemeteries during the past year, Sue Deville's task of documenting the burial sites of Civil War soldiers is far from complete.

As director of the Opeouas Museum and Interpretive Center, Deville plans to use her research to compile a database of Union and Confederacy soldiers who are buried in St. Landry, Evangeline and Acadiana parishes.

Although the focus of her research is locating soldier burials, Deville said pictures of the cemeteries and the stories of the people buried in them also may become part of an exhibit sponsored by the museum.

That list will include names and burial places that Deville said could aid in genealogy research.

"Discovering who is buried in plots is difficult because clues to their identities disappear over time, and grave markers crumble, she said.

"It's similar to a puzzle where you fill the pieces in as you go. Many of the soldiers are buried in forgotten cemeteries.

"You pass by them every day when you're driving, and you don't know they are there," she said.

Access also is hindered since many former soldiers are buried in small cemeteries on private property.

Usually Deville's husband, Gil, accompanies her as she wanders through fields and woods, often obscure graveyards whose locations are no longer familiar.

She is unsure how long the project might take because of the uncertainty about the number of graveyards remaining.

"I've never been able to come up with an exact number. As you do the research, it seems like more of them (graveyards) pop up along the way," Deville said.

Deville took up the project after she learned that Lafayette's Alfred Mouton chapter of the Sons of Confederate Veterans had embarked on a project to document Civil War graves of the Union and Confederate soldiers.

Her interest also was kindled after Deville discovered her great grandfather's headstone, which apparently had never been placed on his grave, she said.

"About the same time that I was starting to get interested in this project, the old house of a deceased elderly couple was bulldozed after it had fallen down.

"One of the things that was found inside the house was my great grandfather's headstone, with CSA (Confederate States of America) across it. It was never put on his grave," she said.

Deville said the three parishes, especially St. Landry, were quite involved during the Civil War.

For several months, Opeouas became the temporary state capital as Union troops occupied Baton Rouge, she said.

In 1863 Union soldiers fought several battles and skirmishes with Confederate troops who moved northward from Morgan City into St. Landry, Deville said.

Deville said northern troops occupied Opeouas for several months in 1861, using high ground around the St. Landry Catholic Church as the main campsite.

She said popular speculation in Opeouas during the Union occupation was that a church pastor was a Confederate spy who passed on enemy information to Confederate troops still in the area.

Most of the Civil War dead buried in St. Landry, Evangeline and Acadia fought for the South, said Deville.

However, Deville located the grave of one Union soldier buried in a family cemetery in the Bellevue community between Opeouas and Sunset.

From what she has ascertained while researching the soldier's past, he married into prominent St. Landry Parish family. After the war, he settled in the area, Deville said.

One cemetery discovery came near Church Point, where Sylvester Colignon, a black soldier, is buried, Deville said.

Deville said Colignon fought for the First Native Guard, which consisted of black soldiers who supported the Confederacy, Deville said.

Deville, who lives in the Wazia community north of Port Barre, said some graves in the Wazia area were altered by the 1927 flood that covered most of eastern and northern St. Landry.

"There are supposed to be 142 graves in the lower Wazia graveyard, but I can only document about 60 of those," she said.

Most of the graves that she has found are in Grand Coteau, possibly because of the Battle of Bayou Bourbeau, which was fought near Chretien Point Plantation in November 1863, according to Deville.

While looking for soldiers' graves, Deville said she was reminded of the diseases and epidemics that struck the parish from time to time.

"Testimony to that can be traced to many large graves around Wazia.

"People were dying at such an alarming rate that they just dug mass graves. There wasn't enough time to mark them.

"In fact I learned that the gardenia bushes in one cemetery were planted there because of the smell from so many graves," said Deville.

Deville said a cemetery on private property in some woods in the Moonville area between Washington and Grand Prairie contains the graves of an unknown Confederate soldier.

Deville said her cemetery documentation has been aided partially by church records kept during the past few centuries and by individuals wanting to help.

A grave dug in a cemetery north of Melville in 1733 is the oldest that Deville has found.

"There are lots of older graves in that cemetery, and some could be older (than 1733), but there are lots of weeds, no markers, and some of the graves have just fallen into the ground," said Deville.

Deville said many of the graveyards she visited had been vandalized.

Although Deville said she hopes eventually to publish the results of her graveyard research, she does not anticipate making money off the project.

"Even if I did a book, it wouldn't be for the money. I would want the names of the soldiers published and then shown maybe as part of the exhibit," Deville said.