Roberts Cove celebrates Germanfest, closeknit heritage

by Amanda L. Guidry

For the past decade, the people of Roberts Cove, located just northwest of Rayne, have honored the German blood that runs through their veins in a community effort of traditional music, dance and food. What began as a family reunion for a former parish priest soon became Germanfest, a cultural celebration of the early German settlers in Acadiana.

"Every year, Father Charles Zaunbrecher started having family reunions on Sundays in October among his own family," explained Josie Thevis, curator for the German Heritage Museum in Roberts Cove. "Other families started having family reunions in October, and he kept saying how he wanted, someday, to have a large family reunion for all families to come at the same time—a reunion for the descendants of the founding families.

"We started in 1995, and Father Zaunbrecher was still living," continued Josie. "He and Clara Habotz—our main person to keep us informed about our German heritage—the festival honored those two people. Father Zaunbrecher told me personally that he felt like he died and went to Heaven for us to have put on this festival, a place where all the Germans could come together and celebrate and be happy together. He died the next year."

Germanfest, which will take place Oct. 7-8 this year, is no longer a simple family reunion, although family is the main focus of the event. Instead, it is a cultural learning experience for all families of all races of all backgrounds, and the people of Roberts Cove invite everyone to attend and learn about their German heritage.

The first church built in Roberts Cove was this wooden St. Leo IV Catholic Church for $550 in 1893. The structure was replaced with a brick building in the 1950s.

(Fontenot, 1979)

age. He was ordained in 1862 in the Archdiocese of Cologne, which is where he met Archbishop Jean-Marie Odin of New Orleans, who persuaded the energetic Thevis to accompany him to the United States.

In 1867, Thevis inherited the pastoral position after Odin's death, and his reputation and influence spread among the German catholics in the city, including relatives of those at the Fabacher settlement.

Reports of the Fabacher colony's success with rice incited Thevis to create his own plan for a German colony in southwest Louisiana, and the priest returned to his native land to discuss the prospect with relatives.

The success of the Fabacher colony was just what the people of Geilenkirchen needed to hear, for they had become increasingly disheartened and troubled by recent events in their homeland.

Between 1864 and 1871, Minister-President of Prussia Otto von Bismarck wielded his might to start three wars of German unification, which actually were wars fought to annex the remaining portions of Germany to Prussia. And as Prussian subjects, the men of Geilenkirchen were forced to fight in these wars.

By 1871, Bismarck held the title of chancellor of the North German Confederation. The iron chancellor feared the country's catholics, particularly because many in government looked to the pope for support, and this threatened his supremacy. He, therefore, waged a fierce political battle—the Kulturkampf—upon Germany's catholics in the 1880s.

Bismarck created the May
In January of 1880, Thevis’ nephew, John Gerhard Thevis, and Herman Grein arrived in New Orleans and traveled with the Rev. Thevis to the area northwest of Rayne. The duo noted the abundance of inexpensive land, the high and fertile soil, and on Jan. 12, they decided to establish themselves in the area, thus creating the Roberts Cove settlement.

Back in Germany, the families that were to move to the new settlement made a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Kevelaer in Germany where they petitioned God for protection for their families on their journey. Then the families journeyed for six weeks on cargo ships before arriving on Louisiana’s welcoming shores.

Ten people made that first trip to the New World. Several days later, all 13 Germans (John Gerhard Thevis and Herman Grein included) arrived in Roberts Cove and became the first permanent inhabitants of the settlement.

Throughout the ensuing months, more settlers arrived in Roberts Cove and purchased farmland. And in 1881, the Rev. Thevis encouraged another wave of immigrants to move to the settlement, citing religious freedom as one of the benefits. His endorsement brought 49 more settlers to the community.

After another wave of 21 new settlers, the colony began to grow from within, although people from the Fabacher community and Germans from elsewhere joined the settlement. Finally, with the difficult first years behind them, the people of the cove experienced growth and success, adapting to the agricultural conditions of the area and establishing a German church and a school.

When the Germans first arrived in Roberts Cove—the settlement was named after Benjamin Robert, the original owner of the Spanish land grant on Bayou Plaquemine Brulee’s south side—they attended the catholic church in Rayne. Because the trek was long, they built a small chapel in the wooded area of Roberts Cove where they could go to pray instead of making the long journey to the church several times a week. The chapel, christened Waldfahrtskapelle (chapel in the woods), was built in honor of their pilgrimage to Kevelaer.

In 1883, the Rev. Aegidius Hennemann, a Benedictine monk from Munich who had immigrated as a result of the Kulturkampf, arrived in New Orleans, and the Rev. Thevis quickly told him about the Roberts Cove community. He traveled to the settlement, purchased 640 acres and converted the buildings into a chapel, a rectory and a schoolhouse. Two years later, the colony acquired a German priest and a teacher, and the first St. Leo IV church building was erected.

And thus, the German settlers in Roberts Cove prospered. They had their health, their families, their livelihood and, finally, their church.