‘Southern Style’
Louisiana weddings reflect culture, tradition

By MARY SWANN
Assistant Lifestyle Editor

From the aisles of old cathedrals to shady plantation grounds, elaborate Louisiana weddings reflect the area’s colorful heritage.

Louisianians, and Acadians or “Tajans” in particular, are moved by a family attitude that sparks large, festive celebrations, says Lafayette bridal consultant Mary Jane Brotherton. Visiting a Louisiana ceremony, one may witness anything from a solemn, traditional service, to vows being exchanged in an old French chapel on the grounds of a reestablished Acadian village.

Various local traditions include carriage rides for the bride and groom. Colorful dancing, heavy eating, the “cake pull,” and “money dance.”

Traditions vary among different areas of the state, however. What is commonplace in New Orleans may not be practiced in Lafayette. But common is all that native take pride in family, friends and festivities. Families are close and so personalize nuptial occasions to make them more memorable by including more children and relatives in the ceremony, Brotherton says.

Sometimes held on plantation grounds, rather than in a church, outdoor spring and summer weddings are popular, as the bridal party and their guests gather under moonlit covered cypress trees.

Karen Kramer Broussard celebrated her outdoor wedding at Christien Point, a plantation home in Sunset which lent its stairway to a scene in the film “Gone With the Wind.”

It was my childhood dream to have an outdoor wedding with all of the flowers in the south,” said Broussard, born and raised in New Berna. “I’m a southern girl at heart, and we wanted to do an early southern did, using whatever was available as far as flowers, food and trimmings” were concerned.

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Weddings

Her attendants carried fresh magnolia blossoms, and at her reception, bowls of lemons were placed on tables; the novel said they brought good luck. She included plenty of fresh fruit and bread, concentrating on keeping food simple, as in the old days. "It doesn't have to be expensive" to be memorable, she said.

The ceremony, although it was performed by a Protestant minister, had "Catholic" influences, Broussard said. Her husband is Catholic, and Catholic marriages are noted for their grand receptions with plenty of music and dancing.

Another outdoor ceremony with a historical southern theme was that of Shawn Neumann and Eric Stevens. The couple were united in the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist and celebrated their reception, like the Broussards, at Christien Point.

The combined traditional and historical elements of both the cathedral, built in 1823, and the plantation, built in 1831, served as a focal point for the occasion, said Mel Neumann, Shawn's mother. Both buildings are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Entertaining up to 700 guests at the April wedding, Neumann said organizing such an event "is like a play" or any other production, in that "costumes and lighting play an important role."

Candelight or evening ceremonies are also more popular here than throughout the rest of the country, according to Broussard.

The Louisiana bride and her attendants often resemble southern belles, outfitted in antebellum-style gowns featuring full skirts with fitted "scarlet O'Hara" waists. The bride sometimes choose a gown worn by her mother or grandmother to uphold family tradition, says Broussard.

Also in keeping with the area's tradition, those familiar with Mardi Gras sometimes celebrate with a "second line," popular at New Orleans street parades during which one person leads the hand with an accordian and others form a train, following behind or alongside.

The "cake pull," another reception tradition, designates the "Old Maid" and who will be the next to marry. The bride chooses several bridesmaids and close friends to gather around the cake table, each grabbing a ribbon extending from the cake. The women pull them all at once to find a trinket on the end of each. The "pull" may be anything from a trinket, symbolizing the "old maid," to a ring, signaling the next to marry.

After months of expensive planning, the couple is treated to a "money dance," a tradition which originated in Germany. Broadhurst says, "Guests line up to take turns dancing with the bride and groom, and as each dance begins, the guest pays a bill to the newlyweds to help fund the bride's dowry."

Local photographer Charles Hines enjoys capturing the essence of the Old South through photographing Louisiana ceremonies. His work has been featured across the nation, and his most recent honor was having his photos of the Neumann/Stevens wedding featured in Elegant Bride magazine.

Whether formal or informal, the Louisiana wedding celebration is one of great detail with an emphasis on receptions, he says. Louisiana weddings, he will tell you, have "visual impact," unique rituals, and a party that you just don't find in other places.