They'll have a 'berry' good time at Starks' Mayhaw Festival

By CYNTHIA V. CAMPBELL

Travel editor

In merry old England, folks welcomed May by going a-maying, gathering flowers, dancing. In Starks, La., folks celebrate a bit differently. They gather in "greater downtown Starks" for the annual Mayhaw festival.

The event, being held today and tomorrow, 10 a.m.-10 p.m., features mayhaw jelly cooked every way you can think of. Mayhaw berries are the fruit of the thorny hawthorn tree. The small round reddish fruit resembles a crabapple. In some areas it ripens in May, but in Starks, the tree usually ripens in March. The tree is a wild native fruit tree that grows in river bottoms and swampy areas. It's found from The Trinity River of Texas and eastward through Louisiana, Georgia and into Florida. Starks' close proximity to the Sabine River ensures an abundance of mayhaw berries, which are used to make pies, ice cream, syrup, glazes and jelly.

The idea of having a Mayhaw festival is attributed to J.R. Franks, owner of the Starks Water and Gas Co. and the Starks Feed and Hardware Store. He was so determined to get the festival going in 1993 that he vowed to sit under a shade tree and eat a mayhaw jelly sandwich all by himself if no one else showed up.

He didn't have to worry. The first event drew 40 booths. Now, the festival boasts more than 100 craft and food booths and thousands of visitors.

People can sample all the mayhaw treats they want and enjoy games, carnival rides and food. Entertainment will feature a number of local gospel groups.

The festival has been named one of the Top 20 Events in May by the Southeast Tourism Society.

"We're not a big festival," said Helen Johnson, secretary for the Starks Business and Civic Association. "We get calls from people all over the United States wanting to come."

Starks, located on La. 109 in southwest Louisiana and about 12 miles north of Interstate 10, has a population of about 3,000. "We're just a rural community, about 6 miles from the Texas border," said Johnson. "We have a caution light."

The Calcasieu Parish town was named for Bill Stark, (or Starks) who lived in the area. His name was selected by early settlers because he played an active part in helping to develop the community. The area's main industry for years was farming and sawmills. Logs were floated from Starks to Orange, Texas. Later they were sent by rail and truck. In the early part of this century, there were turpentine camps in the area.

"Right now, the biggest and brightest thing in town is Stark's Truck Stop and Casino (video poker)," said Johnson. "The owner is descended from the original Stark family."

Johnson recommends visitors stay at hotels in nearby Orange, Texas, in Lake Charles, Vinton or Sulphur. For information call (318) 743-6221. For more information on attractions, hotels and restaurants in southwest Louisiana, call (800) 456-7952 or (318) 436-9588.