USL Primate Center receives
$2.45 million research grant

NEW IBERIA — The USL
New Iberia Research Center
will become an important
part of the national effort to find a
cure for virus-caused diseases,
as the result of recently issued
contracts for $2.45 million from
the National Institutes of
Health (NIH).

One contract, for $1.57
million, extends for three years
experiments in degenerative
central nervous system dis-
deseases. Another, for $880,000,
establishes a chimpanzee
breeding and research pro-
gram.

"In essence, we have become
a resource of the National
Institutes of Health in sup-
porting their research," explained
Dr. W.E. Greer, director of the
USL New Iberia Research
Center (NIRC).

NIRC includes extensive
clinical and laboratory
equipment, and a colony of
some 2,500 primates, which
serve as research animals.

"This extension will allow us
greater latitude to study new
slow infections," said Dr. C.J.
Gibbs Jr., deputy chief of the
NIH Laboratory for Central
Nervous System Studies, in a
telephone interview from his
Bethesda, Md. office.

Gibbs said NIH wants to
reproduce human viral dis-
esases in animals.

"Once you’ve done that,
you’ve established an
etiological relationship of
the virus to the disease. We will
isolate and test the virus, study-
ing how it affects the body,
particularly the brain."

Gibbs added that vaccines for
some diseases will be tested at
NIRC within a year.

NIRC provides NIH scientists
with the manpower and the
monkey power to carry out
experiments. According to
Gibbs, NIRC director Greer is
"without question one of the
best primate veterinarians in
the world. His ability to
manage very complex pro-
grams, and to be adaptable to
NIH investigators, is invaluable.
We really put him to the
task sometimes."

The contract for central
cnervous system disease re-
srch continues a study that
began in 1968 — a study that led
Carlton, Ga. Dr. Gajdusek, in the
1976 Nobel Prize for Medicine.

Gajdusek, an NIH scientist,
showed that a central nervous
system disease called “kuru”
was in fact transmissible,
caused by a slow-acting virus
that produced no inflammation.
All lab experiments in trans-
mitting “kuru” to lab animals
took place in New Iberia.

"Kuru" was originally found
only in one remote tribe in New
Guinea, whose cannibalistic
rites allowed the disease to be
transmitted. After the virus
entered a victim, its symptoms
— an uncontrollable laughing
response and gradual mental
degeneration, then death —
took four to eight years to
manifest themselves.

The tribe has since

abandoned cannibalism, and
“kuru” no longer exists among
humans.

However, the clues Gajdusek
turned up may defeat other
disease. Subsequent research
suggests some central nervous
system disorders are caused by
transmissible viruses, but
others — like Alzheimer’s
disease — are viral but not
transmissible.

But whether the diseases
originate from a source outside
the body or not, some trigger-
ing mechanism gets them
started. Scientists using NIRC
facilities will be looking for
clues about that triggering
mechanism.

That same biological mecha-
nism could conceivably trigger
AIDS, cancer and other dis-
eses. Finding it could produce
a major breakthrough in pre-
venting some of mankind’s
worst diseases.

"The public doesn’t realize
that most research is a team
effort," Greer said. "Many
scientists find little bits of
information, then somebody
puts all the pieces of the puzzle
together.

"We couldn’t whip polio until
we found you could grow the
virus that caused it in a
monkey kidney."

The chimpanzee is the only
animal susceptible to human
viral hepatitis and AIDS. This
makes chips in high demand for
research. African nations have

successfully destroyed con-
siderable chipa habitats, thus
the U.S. has not imported wild
chimps since 1973. But the U.S.
has only 1,200 chimp for
biomedical research, and of
these, fewer than one-third are
suitable for a breeding pro-
gram, according to NIH of-
icials.

The USL New Iberia Re-
srch Center was one of five
primate centers in the U.S.
recently chosen for chimp
breeding projects. NIRC begins
the program with 45 chimp,
and has a project goal of 93.

Chimpanzees normally pro-
duce one offspring every two
to three years, although some
give birth annually, and some