Acadian Village Preserves Cajun Culture

By AMANDA GRIFFIN

If Keith Cravey's dream is realized, the Acadian Village will eventually become more than just a collection of authentic Acadian houses for people to admire. It will become a "living museum." Cravey, as manager of the village, looks forward to the day when the village will have agricuture, animals, craftsmen, and people as part of the display to put it on par with Williamsburg and the restoration that has taken place there.

"The primary plan of the 'living museum' concept is to make the village more than just a showcase for artifacts," Cravey said. "I would like to see an atmosphere created by the homes, plus antiques, crafts and agriculture that would create a more complete picture of the culture of the 19th century Acadian people."

Cravey became manager of the Acadian Village last June, and although he has a B.A. in English from USL, had has done work towards his master's degree, he doesn't feel that is what landed him the job.

"I have worked since 1973 with the Council on the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) Cajun Music Festival, and my other background in Cajun folklore is what got me the job," Cravey said.

Cravey sees a great deal of determination and perseverance in the Acadian people who were driven from their homes in Nova Scotia to settle in an area vastly different from their home. The Acadian Village provides an opportunity for newcomers to Acadia to learn about the French heritage, and it also provides oldtimers a chance to refresh themselves on their culture.

"The Village really has the potential for educating newcomers and making them aware of what Cajun culture is all about," Cravey said. Hopefully, the Village is also a place where visitors can grasp the strength that characterizes the French people and has made them an ethnic group that has survived through encroachments on their language and culture, Cravey said.

The Village is owned by the Lafayette Association for Retarded Citizens and was created in the 1960's as a center where the handicapped could learn and work. Mr. and Mrs. Elias J. Allen donated their 33-acre farm and with the help of various civic groups old Acadian homes were bought, relocated and carefully restored on the site.

Five houses, a replica of a general store which is clerked and stocked by handicapped citizens; and replicas of a chapel and a barn complete the village which is cut by a meandering bayou and walking paths.

An old time Festival du Courir du Mardi Gras was held on the cold, wet Saturday before Mardi Gras at the Village, and visitors witnessed masked riders gathering the ingredients for their gumbo, and of course sampled the end product. This was the second year for the festival and Cravey termed it a "success" for those who attended.

Future festivals at the Village include: March 29, "Welcome to Spring," a festival which will feature a big plant sale, and a sheep to shawl demonstration that shows the steps from shearing sheep to spinning the wool.

The Village is located south of Lafayette and is open year round except major holidays. Visitor hours are 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Memorial Day through Labor Day and 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. the balance of the year. Admission is $2 for adults, $1 for students and senior citizens, and children under six are laguiappe, Cravey said.

VILLAGE MANAGER — Keith Cravey, a native of Henderson and a resident of Lafayette for 25 years, is the Village manager. His previous work with the Cajun Music Festival and his sincere interest in preserving the Cajun culture, and his English degree from USL, helped land him the job last June. He hopes to see the Acadian Village become a "living museum."

CASTILLE HOUSE — Built around 1830 by the Dorsene Castille family, this house was moved from the Breaux Bridge area to the Village. It is the Village's most soundproof structure. The fancy woodwork is typical of a more wealthy family and it is constructed of bousillage entre poteaux, a mixture of mud and moss. The house contains the Village doctors' museum, sponsored by the Lafayette Parish Medical Auxiliary, and displays equipment used by a typical 19th century doctor.