

Little Houses

Filmmakers lead effort to preserve cemetery tradition

THEY ARE MONUMENTS TO THE dead unlike any others in Acadiana: small wooden houses with gabled roofs, windows and doors, built over a handful of graves in a rural Acadia Parish cemetery.

A trio of filmmakers, Donny, Jeremy and Zach Broussard, tell the story of these structures in a short film, "Little Houses: A Small Film About Death," which has inspired the rebirth of the unusual burial custom.

The Istre family of Mermentau Cove set aside land for the cemetery in the 1800s. No one knows for certain when the first grave houses were built, but records dating back to the 1930s show



there were a number of houses there.

"At one time, there were perhaps as many as 40 or 50 grave houses in the Istre cemetery. When we began to document them, there were only three left standing," Jeremy Broussard said.



Left: The Istre grave house. *Top left:* Jeremy Broussard, Donny Broussard and Zach Broussard, creators of "Little Houses." *Above:* The LeBlanc grave house is one of three such monuments listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Jeremy and Zach Broussard, who are brothers, grew up in Mermentau Cove near the cemetery. "In Acadiana, we're surrounded by unique cultural expressions but I think because we're immersed in the culture, we don't al-

ways recognize the significance of our traditions," said Jeremy Broussard.

"We wanted to find out why the houses were built. They don't look like any other above-ground structure you might see in a south Louisiana cemetery. They're not crypts. They're not mausoleums. They're something altogether different."

He said there were three goals associated with the film. "We wanted to preserve the houses on film, to get the houses listed on the national historic register and to inspire people to preserve the graves."

Jeremy Broussard and Donny Broussard began the film project in 2002, working with a camera crew of six UL Lafayette student volunteers.

Donny Broussard, a UL Lafayette grad who is director of the university's Visual Arts Resource Center, recalled the experience. "At the beginning, we didn't have a clear idea of what the story would be. We just knew it was important to document the houses that were still standing.

"We camped out for two days and filmed in the freezing cold," he said. The team captured footage of the cemetery and began interviewing residents in the community, collecting stories about the grave houses and their possible origins.

"When we started the film, we were



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The documentary "Little Houses" explores the history and folklore connected with grave houses in an Acadia Parish cemetery.

hoping to find out why the houses were built. We never found that answer, but I think the fact that the question remains unanswered makes the film even more compelling."

After the initial filming, "Little Houses" was "put on the back burner for several years because of family commitments," said Jeremy Broussard.

"Then my brother Zach picked up the project and finished it for us."

In 2007, Zach Broussard enlisted the help of UL Lafayette's Cinematic Arts Workshop, working with folklorist Conni Castille and filmmaker Allison Bohl to update the script and shoot additional footage. The Workshop also provided office space and editing facilities.

"It took a long time to complete the film, but we eventually reached all our goals," Zach Broussard said.

In February 2008, the grave houses were added to the National Register of Historic Places. In 2009, the filmmakers created Benefilms, a non-profit organization that distributes "Little Houses." It dedicates 20 percent of DVD sales for the houses' preservation. The film premiered May 1, 2009, at the Rice Theatre in Crowley. To date, Benefilms has raised about \$1,500 for the preservation project.

In April, Jeremy Broussard published *Grave House Legends*, a book that complements the film. Ten percent of the book's profits are dedicated to the preservation effort.

Charles Richard, director of the Cinematic Arts Workshop, said the film is "an ideal example of the kind of project the workshop supports. It's a well-told story with aesthetic merit that is helping to increase cultural awareness."

"Donny, Jeremy and Zach have definitely taken on the role of activist filmmakers with this piece," Richard added.

Leonard Smith, a lifelong resident of Mermentau Cove and president of the Istre Cemetery Board, said the filmmakers inspired him to carry on the grave house tradition. In March of last year, he built a new house over the grave of his

infant granddaughter, Karien Joy Benoit, who died in 1990.

The unpainted cypress house has a metal roof, "a window on each side and a little door with a latch. It kind of looks like a little doll house," Smith said.

"I just felt that I needed to put something over her. And I thought, 'If I make a little house, maybe other people will get interested and build some more.'" ■



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Interior of the Istre grave house

CINEMATIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Part of the UL Lafayette Cinematic Arts Workshop's mission is the "expression of art and ideas through digital media." Its productions include award-winning documentary films, promotional videos and content for educational computer games. The Workshop's main focus is to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among students and professionals, including off-campus producers and faculty.

Conni Castille, a folklorist and filmmaker, is assistant director of the Workshop. Its latest project, a documentary set for release in June, tells the story of how Breaux Bridge became known as the Crawfish Capital of the World.

Other Cinematic Arts Workshop productions include:

■ **"Pin Pal,"** a promotional video that supports Festival International de Louisiane, the largest outdoor Franco-phone live music event in the United States. Held in downtown Lafayette each April, the festival relies on the sale of artist-designed pins to maintain free admission. The festival has an estimated annual economic impact of more than \$20 million.

■ **"BeauSoleil: Louisiana's Solar Home,"** a promotional video for UL Lafayette's Louisiana BeauSoleil Solar Home project. The energy-efficient, sustainable home won two top awards in the U.S. Department of Energy's 2009 Solar Decathlon, an international competition among 20 universities.

■ **"Congrès Mondial: the Bid for Louisiana,"** a 10-minute documentary created for the Lafayette Visitors and Convention Center, accompanied Louisiana's proposal for the world gathering of Cajun and Acadian descendants.

■ **"Raised on Rice and Gravy: A Film About Plate Lunch Houses In South Louisiana,"** a documentary that serves up the traditions of Cajun and Creole cooking in neighborhood lunch houses.

■ **"I Always Do My Collars First: A Film About Ironing,"** a documentary look at how a mundane chore is valued as a ritual and an expression of cultural identity in the lives of four Cajun women in French Louisiana.