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Success Stories

VI 2002

Developing & Enhancing
Louisiana's Tourism Products

12th Annual Rural Tourism
Development Conference
Hemingbough Conference Center

October 23-25, 2002
St. Francisville, LA

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Hemingbough Conference Center**

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Sponsors

Louisiana Sea Grant College Program
Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism
Louisiana Travel Promotion Association
West Feliciana Parish Tourist Commission
Town of St. Francisville
St. Francisville Main Street



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Committed to Customers

Chris Smits

Cajun Pride Swamp Tours, LaPlace

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” is a policy I have tried to live by all of my life. As it relates to my business and tourism, the saying reminds me that the people who come to us are on vacation. Vacations are supposed to be fun and relaxing so I try to make sure they have that fun experience when they tour with us.

“Build your success on the success of others” is another one of my favorite slogans. The people in the community who do a fine job at their business are incorporated into my tour. I visit quality places and it translates into a quality tour for me. If something is interesting or fun or unique, I stop there even if I don’t make any money for myself. This helps our community and indirectly helps me provide a quality tour experience.

“It’s not carved in stone.” I keep this in mind to try and stay flexible and remember that each group has its own personality. We try to train our drivers and staff to be flexible and interact with those accompanying them today. Since the people change on a daily basis, our goal is to entertain those with us, whatever that takes. This is where building the tour around quality places pays off; when my customers are with them, they are entertained, and when the customers are at our attraction or back in our vehicle, they have our commitment to their good time.

Our growth has had obstacles. Some of the obstacles have been “growing pains.” We grew very fast so each person on our tour team was pushed to the max. Without ongoing communication, individuals tend to feel burdened, pulling all the weight alone. It has been very important for us to have regular staff meetings and discuss problems and activities. Once an individual hears what is happening for another person, he or she doesn’t feel isolated, and he or she can see how an activity fits into the overall success of the business. No single person makes any business a success; it is always a group effort.

In-house communication has also been an obstacle. We have found that we need to put policy and directives into a written memorandum, which we all sign off on. Otherwise things get overlooked. At times the volume of memos seems excessive, but when we try to curb the volume, we come right back to the same problem. So, for us, memos have become a way to avoid errors or the cop out, "Nobody told me."

I have also found that owning a business results in a never-ending list of roadblocks. Just as you would on the highway, you take another route, or sometimes even make another route where none previously existed.

And finally, my all time favorite saying is: "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing poorly until you learn to do it right." Everything we do, important or otherwise, has a learning curve. That is the period of time it takes us to move from newness to expertise. If you adopt this philosophy, you can give yourself permission to learn and improve as you develop, and avoid the paralysis caused by fear of making a mistake.

A General for Volunteers

Lelia Minvielle

Abbeville Volunteer Tour Guides, Abbeville

First impressions can be deceiving. If you doubt the veracity of that statement then you need to meet a lady by the name of Lelia D. Minvielle. Upon first meeting Miss Lelia you will encounter a personality that brings to mind oft used phrases such as “genteel southern charm,” “sweet as a magnolia,” or “delicate refinement”. Spend some more time with Miss Lelia, or better yet, work on a project with her, and you’ll soon understand why she is referred to - sometimes reverently and always lovingly - as “The General.”

As her children matured and started families and lives of their own, Miss Lelia began to volunteer with new zeal and enthusiasm. She has never tired of her responsibilities. No one appreciates her commitment to quality more than the organizations lucky enough to have been chosen as the beneficiary of her untiring efforts. Miss Lelia is involved with the Giant Omelette Celebration, the Old Cemetery Committee of St. Mary Magdalen Church, and the Abbeville Main Street Program.

In 1989, Miss Lelia was approached by the Abbeville Chamber of Commerce to put together and host a tour of homes for the Giant Omelette Celebration. That Tour of Homes remains as one of the most popular aspects of the festival, with tickets selling out in advance of the event. As is typical with Miss Lelia’s projects, one thing led to another and before long, she had put together a group of dedicated individuals who agreed to research the history of Abbeville’s founding, subsequent development and its architecture. With the historical facts in hand, and with Miss Lelia’s energy and enthusiasm, the Volunteer Tour Guides began conducting walking tours of the Abbeville Downtown Historic District. The tours have developed further, and are currently offered in English and French. These bilingual tours make our French-speaking tourists feel honored and welcome.

The Volunteer Tour Guides and the guided walking tours of downtown have become an integral part of practically every preplanned visit to Abbeville. Journalist's from all media never do any story about Abbeville's history and culture without including an interview with Miss Lelia.

The Volunteer Tour Guides are a wonderful way to promote tourism, educate and portray southern Cajun hospitality. After the tours, the Guides often join the visitors for lunch or dinner. They seat themselves throughout the crowd, offering menu suggestions and adding tidbits of Abbeville history and culture. The Tour Guides make everyone feel welcome, like long-lost family members who have returned home. Tour groups often praise the Tour Guides and vow to return again. The Abbeville Tour Guides under the direction of Lelia Minvielle have been and remain an outstanding group of ambassadors of goodwill for Abbeville.

Hospitality Stimulates Business

David and Emily Wortman

Wortman Pottery, Duson

Over 20 years, Wortman Pottery has grown from a small studio to a thriving operation. During the last several years, David and Emily Wortman have consistently used their home-based business, located in the rice fields of Duson, to promote rural tourism in Louisiana.

Several years ago, the Wortmans constructed a delightful showroom on their rural property in Acadia Parish to display and market their pottery from their home base. Soon after the showroom was complete, David and Emily became active members of the Louisiana Travel Promotion Association (LTPA), and used their experiences to build their own business and promote other tourist attractions as well.

Currently David serves on the LTPA Consumer Marketing Committee. After joining LTPA, he used the LTPA annual summits to learn about tourism promotion, and the annual Rural Tourism Conferences to learn about marketing rural attractions. He has applied lessons learned to his business.

Signage is an obstacle for those seeking rural attractions. David has taken full advantage of the Department of Transportation and Development's signage program to guide visitors to the pottery showroom in Acadia Parish.

At the Wortman Pottery showroom, visitors are treated to a personal experience that goes far beyond a business' basic obligations. Numerous customers from throughout the United States have been so pleased with their experiences that they have written thank you notes.

When visitors arrive, they are free to enjoy the environment as well as the studio. They may sit on a Cajun-style front porch and relax, viewing bird and plant life, and crawfish traps that decorate the porch. Inside the showroom, visitors are given personal, cultural, and historical information about the region. In this two-person shop with no additional employees, visitors can talk directly with one of the potters. David and

Emily are always willing to provide tours of their workshop and demonstrate pottery making. They keep examples of rice grown on the farm to explain the process that takes place in the surrounding fields, and they explain how rice fields are also used as crawfish ponds. In season, visitors can often see crawfish harvesting across the road.

To promote Louisiana tourism attractions, the Wortman's have standard card racks and well-marked guidebooks to assist their visitors. Emily has prepared a binder of articles about local and statewide attractions for tourist to browse through. The pair offers guidance on tours, restaurants, museums, and whatever else visitors need to know. They keep local maps and a highlighter handy to provide directions. In essence, the Wortman's function as a mini-CVB.

The Wortman's excellent entrepreneurial skills have supported them as potters for over 25 years. Ever since they added tourism promotion, the pair has tripled the number of sales in their showroom. While there is no way to measure the economic impact of personal attention, if visitors are motivated to write personal thank you notes to show their gratitude for such an authentic, valuable experience, they must be willing to return to the state for more such experiences. If rural tourism is about authenticity, human connections, and cultural enrichment, then Wortman Pottery has excelled in developing and promoting a unique tourism experience in the rice fields and crawfish ponds of Duson, Louisiana.

Double Tour - Cycle and See

Randy Slagle and Main Street Managers Association

Cycle Main Street Bicycle Ride

In April 1997, officials from the Office of Cultural Development and Office of State Parks met to discuss a proposal made by the then state coordinator of the Louisiana Main Street Program to develop a cross-state bike ride to coincide with the state's celebration of Francofête. The plan was to host a week long bicycle ride through Louisiana on a north/south route in May 1999.

The Main Street Program at the local level is concerned with revitalization efforts of downtown areas to protect the historic structures and to stimulate economic development in the community. The Main Street managers in 24 participating communities had formed an association to promote cooperative endeavors between communities, to promote themselves in a unified manner, to raise money to showcase communities and state parks, and to bring repeat visitors to the state through cultural tourism efforts.

At first glance most people would ask what Main Street and bike rides have to do with each other. The ride seemed to be an ideal way to link communities, attractions, and parks in rural areas in support of historic preservation, cultural tourism, and recreation.

The 1999 Cycle Main Street Francofête Ride route was planned to go from Springhill to Minden to Winnfield to Natchitoches to DeRidder to Eunice, ending in Abbeville. The managers wanted to continue the ride on an annual basis, selecting a new route each year. Because the Main Street program coordinator was an avid cyclist, the group had a resource on bike rides. The committee of cycle organizations and state offices, coupled with the Main Street managers had enormous enthusiasm and the support of the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism. The ride seemed like a recipe for success.

A barrier appeared. The state coordinator left to pursue another job, leaving no one with knowledge of organizing bicycle rides.

The Main Street managers decided to continue anyway. Randy Slagle, Springhill Main Street Manager, agreed to manage the ride with assistance from Carolyn Phillips of Winnfield and the other Main Street managers. They worked with the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, convention and visitor's bureaus, Office of State Police, the Louisiana National Guard and others. Randy talked to each participant personally, giving him or her the time, enthusiasm, and information needed to get them to participate. With one ad in a national magazine and word of mouth, the ride drew 114 riders from 19 states including Louisiana. Over 50% of the riders were from out-of-state. Some came from as far as New Jersey, New York, Wisconsin, Michigan, California, Alabama, Florida and Oregon.

The goal of all Main Street managers involved in the ride was to make sure everyone had fun, was safe, and every event along the ride was memorable. Each community manager, with a host of volunteers, town officials, and event organizers threw street parties, provided food, music, and friendship to the visitors. One Canadian visitor wrote to express his thanks to those responsible for organizing and facilitating one of the best vacation experiences of the rider's life, and to support future rides. He said the cultural experiences, events and attitudes of Louisianians to the riders was fantastic, and he planned to come back and bring friends. He shared that, although there was some confusion and complications, the volunteers and organizers were genuinely concerned and listened to suggestions for future rides. In fact, Louisiana, which always ranked low on his destination list, was now at the top.

Randy Slagle again took on the responsibility for the 2000 ride and the Office of State Parks became an active partner in the cultural and recreational experiences offered to the riders. Randy and Carolyn's personal involvement with the riders from beginning to end made up for lack of knowledge about organizing bike rides. The Cycle Main Street Ride moved on to the Acadiana area with 180 riders in 2000. Then Randy retired from the program. The ride moved on to northeast Louisiana in

2001 and to southeast Louisiana in 2002, and Randy and her family attended to check on old friends and support the ride.

The ride is now limited to 125 to 150 persons to make it exclusive, and a one-of-a-kind experience. Almost 75% of the rider's are repeat visitors, and they are now bringing their friends to Louisiana. Without the personal attention to riders, organization and promotion of the event, this ride could have been limited to a one-time event. The ride is a wonderful example of coordination and cooperation between communities and agencies in the public and private sector in support of increasing tourism to Louisiana while enhancing the quality of life in their communities and areas.

In 2003, the Louisiana Purchase Louisiana Cycle Main Street ride will be expanded to two back-to-back, one week rides, taking riders from Natchitoches to New Orleans, through the historic communities and countrysides of Louisiana. Personal attention will continue, and cyclists will continue to make Louisiana a sport-vacation destination.

Civic Pride Attracts Tourists

Johnny Raymond

Patriotic Fête de Pont Breaux

In just a few years, the Patriotic Fête de Pont Breaux has become a premier Independence Day in Louisiana. Now drawing audiences of 10,000 or more, it had a simple beginning that grew quickly because of the hard work and professionalism of many volunteers.

The goal of the Patriotic Fête de Pont Breaux is threefold – to celebrate the birthday of our great country, to honor the unselfish military veterans of Acadiana for their dedication, sacrifices and bravery; and to promote patriotism, pride and love for America throughout Acadiana.

The seed for this event was planted at a funeral of a local fallen hero. Response to the eulogy showed that his distinguished military record was unknown to many attending the service. The Breaux Bridge Area Military Hall of Fame was established to preserve this important part of local history, becoming the seed for the Patriotic Fête de Pont Breaux.

In three years the event bloomed from a simple ceremony and a musical program to an event that requires year long planning to execute on the 4th of July. We had to find a funding source to support the program and we had to develop a marketing program to attract an audience. A committee of over 60 skillful volunteers has overcome problems and continues to improve the program content.

One critical problem was funding. As the scope of the program expanded, the necessary planning and funding outgrew the ability of the Chamber of Commerce to sponsor the Fête. A new nonprofit organization, The Patriots of Louisiana, Inc., was formed to sponsor and carry out the extensive planning, funding, and advertising for the event. The new organization is composed of area patriots who are dedicated to promoting patriotism and doing good works throughout Louisiana.

The event includes a patriotic children's parade, parachute jumps, F-15 fighter-jet flyovers, vintage aircraft on display, choirs, stirring music

from a brass band, ceremonies, a bayou parade, celebrity participation and an overwhelming finale as the band plays the 1812 Overture, our church bells ring and a fabulous fireworks program begins. It is a great evening of enjoyment in historic Breaux Bridge. At times there is not a dry eye in the house.

This event is funded entirely from the contributions of individuals, small companies and large area corporations. As we continue to grow, the need for additional funds will continue to be a challenge. Our superb fund development committee will meet it. We believe that we will soon attract national media attention and bring more attention to the Breaux Bridge area that is already well known. This event of pride, The Patriotic Fête de Pont Breaux, is an attraction that we offer to visitors and tourists with pride.

Heritage Shared in Village

Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society

Los Isleños Museum Complex, St. Bernard

Historian Frank Fernandez organized Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society in 1976. It evolved from a documentary, which he helped to produce for WYES TV entitled "St. Bernard Isleños, Louisiana's Disappearing Spanish Heritage." When Fernandez conducted a series of extended oral history interviews with the elders of the Isleños community, Isleño people recognized the importance of documenting their history and culture.

In 1980, the early 19th century home of Vincente Nunez (later the home of Manuel and Camella Molero) was donated to the society by their daughters, Louise O'Toole and Mabel Quatroty. Later the society entered into a cooperative agreement with St. Bernard Parish. The Coconut Island barroom, a board and batten commercial structure, was donated to the society and St. Bernard Parish by JoAnn Messa Bonomo. The barroom has many original features such as a cypress and mahogany bar, metal icebox, and kerosene pump. Donated in 1999, the Estopinal-Salles house is a bousillage-between-post home dating to the late 18th century. Michael Salles donated it to the society and St. Bernard Parish.

The society began to plan for an Isleño village, contracting with an architectural firm to draw a master plan. The society and our state representatives petitioned Governor Foster and obtained a state grant to construct the Isleño center in 2000. Built to resemble the houses in the village, the center serves as a meeting place for the society and other organizations in the parish.

Dorothy O'Toole Benge and Patricia O'Toole, decendants of the Moleros, donated additional land behind the Isleño center to the project. With the donation of the Esteves house and the Cresap-Caserta house in 2002, the society and St. Bernard Parish are well on their way to establishing the Los Isleños heritage as a major part of Louisiana history.

The society members serve as docents in the museum, which is open 11-4 Wednesday through Sunday, and by special appointment. The annual March fiesta brings in some 40,000 visitors in two days. People journey from all over the United States and the Spanish Canary Islands.

A cookbook, written by Dorothy O'Toole Bengé and Laura Sullivan, is sold all over the United States and has been featured in national magazines, *Savoir* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. Celie Robin has published her book on home remedies and cures, highlighting the part of the curanderos played in Isleños culture. Jerry Alfonso and Charles Robin appear at festivals in Louisiana and Mississippi with their duck carvings and historic boat models.

Through the generosity of St. Bernard Parish government, state government, and our members, this added attraction for tourism is a living history of the last vestige of Spanish colonialism in Louisiana.

LOUISIANA RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT SUCCESS STORIES 1991 - 2002

1991

The Old Lecompte School House, Ann Johnson

Small Business Development Center, Northeast Louisiana University,

Paul Dunn - Monroe

Pontchatoula: America's Unique City, Charlene Daniels

The Piney Hills Regional Association, Ruston Lincoln Parish Convention and
Visitors Bureau, Sue Edmonds

Mayor Greg Marcantel - Jennings

McGee's Landing, Mark Allemond - Henderson

1992

Sabine River Authority, Linda Curtis-Sparks - Many

Pack and Paddle, Inc., Joan Williams - Lafayette

West Baton Rouge Museum, Karen Babb - Port Allen

Southwest Louisiana Marketing Consortium, Shelley Johnson - Lake Charles

Claiborne Parish's Handmade/Homegrown Festival, Lubertha Powell - Homer

CoCo Marina, John Glover - Cocodrie

1993

Plantation Pecan and Gift Co., Buddy and Carol Lee Miller - Waterproof

RV River Charters, Inc., E.G.Conrad, Jr. - New Orleans

Lloyd Hall Plantation, Anne Fitzgerald - Cheneyville

Caddo Parish Police Jury, Constable Dale G. Nix - Mooringsport

Sue and Harry Hebert - Plaquemine

Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival, Wilbert Guillory - Opelousas

1994

Jean Lafitte Tourism Commission, Nancy Ting - Lafitte

Global Wildlife Center, Paula Finley - Folsom

Abbeville Main Street, Rochelle Michaud Dugas

The Nature Conservancy's Little Pecan Island Preserve, Allen May

Mayor John Joseph - Opelousas

Town of Minden, Sue Norman

1995

St. Francisville Overnight Association, Madeline Neville

City of Gretna, Virgie Ott

Columbia Downtown Projects, Kay LaFrance

Cameron Parish Tourist Commission, Ed Kelley

Doorway to Louisiana, Inc., Paul Rosenzweig - Lake Providence

River Road Plantation Parade Association, Zeb Mayhew, Jr. - Vacherie

1996

River Road African American Museum and Gallery, Kathy Hambrick -
Gonzales

Southerne Seaplane, Inc., Lyle and Rhonda Panepinto - Belle Chasse

Tammany Trace, Kevin Davis - Slidell

Louisiana Nursery Festival, Clyde Holloway - Forest Hill

Mayor Eric Martin - St. Martinville

Winnie and Jack Baldwin - Bernice

1997

Merryville Historical Society, Keitha C. Donnelly

M. Leroy Harvey, Jr. - Jackson

Richard Seale - Natchitoches

Major Jim P. Petitjean - Rayne

Wildlife Gardens, James and Betty Provost - Gibson

Laura: A Creole Plantation, Norman Marmillion - Vacherie

Lt. Governor's Certificate of Appreciation for Contributions to Nature-
Based Tourism - Annie Miller

1998

Carolyn Phillips - Winnfield

Alligator Bayou Tours & Bluff Swamp Wildlife Refuge, Frank Bonifay and

Jim Ragland - Prarieville

Lincoln Parish Park, Frederic Hoogland - Ruston

Louisiana Coastal Wetlands Workshops, Kay Radlauer - Baton Rouge

St. Augustine Historical Society, Terrel Delphin - Natchitoches

Mayor W. Richard Zuber - Jonesboro

1999

Lafitte's Landing Restaurant at Bittersweet Plantation, Chef John D. Folse -

Donaldsonville

St. Josephs Arts, Inc., Eugenia E. Robbins - St. Joseph

Frogmore Plantation and Cotton Gins, Buddy and Lynette Tanner - Frogmore

Thibodaux Chamber of Commerce - Thibodaux

Festival Ray*La*Nay, Cheryl McCarty - Rayne

Uncle Earl's Hot Dog Trials, Claude O'Bryan - Winnfield

2000

Wilbert (Bill) Elsenrath, Jr. - Denham Springs

Cypress Swamp Tours, Bill Quenan - Westwego

International Rice Festival, Charles (Bill) Williams - Crowley

Vidalia Economic Development Association, Linda Gardner - Vidalia

Ray Pellerin - Breaux Bridge

Vivian S. Oliver - Town of Sunset

Acadian Heritage and Cultural Foundation Inc., and Franco Fete '99,

Warren A. Perrin - Erath

2001

Acadia Tours with Alice, Alice Whiting - Crowley

The Grand Isle Migratory Bird Celebration, Jackie Siears and Jean Landry -
Grand Isle

The Franklin Parish Catfish Festival, Dr. Jerry Golden - Winnsboro

Acadian Museum Living Traditions Program, Kermit Bouillion - Erath

Cajun Tours, Sandra Pellegrin - Houma

Stansil Rice Mill, Travis S. Richard - Gueydan

2002

Cajun Pride Swamp Tours, Chris Smits - LaPlace

Lelia Minvielle - Abbeville

Wortman Pottery, David and Emily Wortman - Duson

Randy Slagle and Main Street Managers Association

Patriotic Fête De Pont Breaux, Johnny Raymond - Breaux Bridge

Los Isleños Heritage and Cultural Society - St. Bernard

