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# KEYNOTE & SUCCESS STORIES

Louisiana Rural Tourism Development Conference



October 11-12, 1994  
Hammond, Louisiana

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Summary of

*Keynote*

*&*

*Success Stories*

FOURTH LOUISIANA RURAL TOURISM  
DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

October 11-12, 1994

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## Keynote Address

### **A Silver Lining: Recruiting Retirees Through Tourism**

by

**Dr. Mike Woods**  
Professor of Agricultural Economics  
Oklahoma State University

I am going to visit with you about attracting retirees as related to tourism and how that relates to economic development. It is interesting to note that in previous years, 35,000 Americans celebrated their birthday by putting 100 candles on their birthday cake. The elderly, those aged 85 and above, are one of the fastest growing segments of the population in this country. Persons aged 50 and over hold about 70% of the personal financial assets in this country. This group does not represent a short-term phenomenon. The baby boomers are rapidly approaching this era as well. And they are, to a large extent, also financially secure.

These observations show us a number of reasons to look at retirees that migrate as an economic development option: (1) retirees that can afford to migrate and that are interested in migrating are generally more affluent. They have the money to move and the assets to sustain their life style. (2) Older Americans tend to consume within the community where they reside; and (3) in many cases these older Americans bear a larger portion of the taxes, while not always consuming as many of the services.

I have had the pleasure over the last several years of working with a number of individuals. One gentleman that I work with in Alabama, Martin Dougherty, has been in the tourism business for many years. In fact there is a statewide, state government initiative to recruit retirees to Alabama. Martin Dougherty notes that when he was growing up, people made money in rural areas and small towns by picking cotton, and that was pretty tough. He said that later on in his life after working at tourism, he concluded that picking those tourists was much easier than picking cotton. And he said that attracting retirees is even better. They move in and they stay; they are not just coming for a few days. So for that reason he thinks that recruiting retirees is something of interest.

We did a retiree study that was funded through the Southern Rural Development Center at Mississippi State University to look at this whole area of attracting retirees as an economic development option. I'm going to give you a brief overview of this project, and the project's findings, and then I'm going to show you how this program can be linked to your tourism program.

## The Retiree Study

A regional project, involving three states (Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas), gathered some information about retirees that had migrated to some communities. We used a technique called focus groups. We specifically looked for the expenditure pattern of the retiree households (how much they spend and what their economic impact was), and then more qualitative information (where did they come from, why do they like it here, what do they not like about this community). We also were very interested in their level of involvement in the new community and level of support for local issues such as school bond issues.

Just a little bit about the method or procedure of this study. We selected target communities in the three states and then relied on local volunteers, county extension offices, and local chambers of commerce to help us identify the individuals and households to be studied. After we had identified these people, we gave each one a household expenditure questionnaire — a rather lengthy and rather nosy questionnaire — asking them very specific questions about dollars. We let them keep that for a week or so, and then asked that they bring it to a focus group meeting. We were quite surprised at their willingness to fill out this information. During the focus groups, we asked them some of the other more general questions while sitting informally around a table, tape recording the conversation. We

then had the recordings transcribed so that we could analyze them.

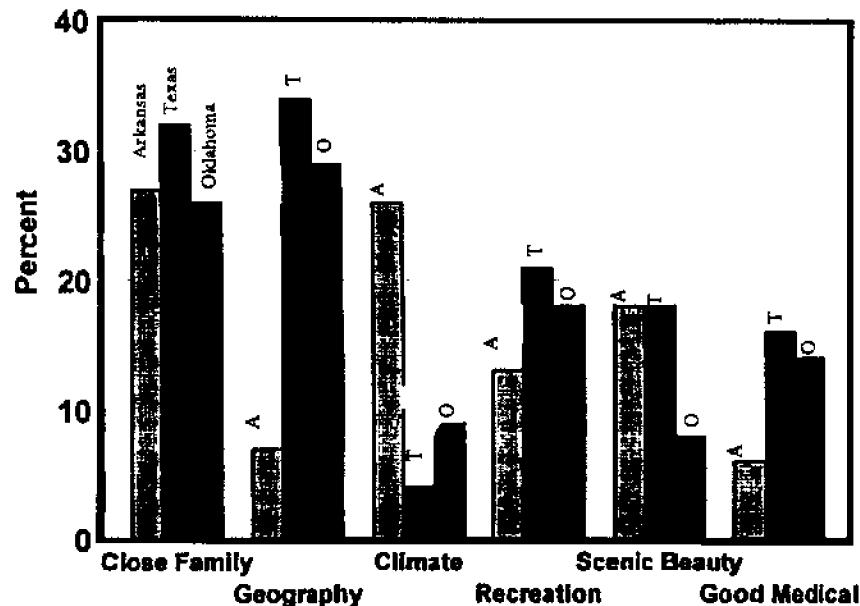
We ended up with about nine counties over a three-state area — Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. We worked with about three counties in each of the states. In Arkansas, the counties are Benton, Garland, and Clark counties. Benton County includes the planned community Bella Vista, owned by Cooper Industries Inc. They build retirement villages not only in Arkansas, but also in Tennessee and Georgia (a fairly successful planned retirement community operation). We included Hot Springs Village, also owned by Cooper Industries, in Garland County. The third community and county in Arkansas, Arkadelphia in Clark County, has a couple of state universities, Ouchita Baptist University and Henderson State University. It is a university town. In Texas, we chose East Texas because it was similar to the counties we'd selected in Arkansas and Oklahoma. In Oklahoma, we had three counties. Delaware County is where the community of Grove sits on Grand Lake. This large lake and recreational area in the Ozark National Forest is a very pretty place with a lot of tourism- and recreation-based activity. In Cherokee County, the community of Tahlequah is the location of a small regional university, Northeastern State University. The third county in Oklahoma, Payne County, is the location of the community of Stillwater and Oklahoma State University.

Throughout these nine counties, we talked with a total of 249 individuals representing 193 households. We had a pretty good representation across the three-state area. In most of the literature we had read, studies of this type were usually focused on one particular community or state. We wanted to see if similarities were possible across three states or, if trends were limited or unique.

Keep in mind that we studied retirees that moved to these communities from somewhere else. They migrated. Lets look at: Who are they, Where do they come from, Why did they move, and then What is the economic impact of their living in that community.

**Who are they?** We had good distribution across the three states of all the respondents: 44% from Arkansas, 18% from Texas, and 38% from Oklahoma. We examined results by state and by individual counties. We did see some variability. For example, within Payne County, Oklahoma, we actually surveyed three communities. Our research provided a very rich data set. By

## Important Features Affecting Relocation



communities, I actually mean survey groups. For example, the age of these participants fell into three ranges: age 60-69 (45% of the respondents); age 70-79 (38%); less than age 60 (6%); and age 80 or older (11%). The age of the respondents tended to be a little older in Oklahoma than in Arkansas or Texas. So there was some variability across the states.

One of the questions that we asked them was: "Since moving to this community, are your friends that you socialize with in this community also 'in-migrants' or are they part of the indigenous population, the people that you met when you moved here?" About 25% of them said that 100% of their

friends were fellow in-migrants. Yet these people also said they felt very much at home in the new community, and that they had been made to feel welcome there.

Another question sought data on their pre-retirement occupations. A large number retired from professional and technical jobs, management and administrative positions, or clerical and service jobs. Many had held professional type jobs, in many cases with higher levels of income than the community average where they migrated.

**Where did they come from?** We found that 43% in Texas, 44% in Oklahoma, and 16% in Arkansas came from another community in that same state or from one of the nearby states in our survey. We also found that a lot of upper midwest people moved to these states, while some along the east coast and some out west (with a very heavy emphasis from California) settled in these three states. In Oklahoma we found a lot of migration back to Oklahoma. In some cases, people had never given up title to property in Oklahoma or it remained in the family. They came back because it is "home" and because it is economical.

**What made them come back or come to our area?** We gave them choices that they could rank so that the No.1s were first priorities or very important. (1) The retirees ranked mild climates as a priority. Note many of these people were from the

upper mid west, and they keep contact with friends in Minnesota, North and South Dakota. They also told us extremes are not desirable. One person said, "I went to Florida. I didn't like it, it was too much the other extreme. The seasons never changed, leaves never changed colors." (2) Low cost in living is always important. For example, in a little community of Perkins in Payne County (Perkins is a little town of about 1,000 people, about a 20-minute drive from Stillwater, nice rural community with access to a larger town) in-migrants from California sold a home in California and bought double the size of the home in Oklahoma with money left over to put in the bank. These settlers said they were attracted to the small town atmosphere, and the lack of crime as well as the lower cost of living. This category includes taxes — types of taxes, how taxes are used — as well as basic costs like housing and medical expenses. Medical expenses are balanced by the quality of service for the price. (3) Locally available adequate medical services were ranked high. (4) A few recreational opportunities were noted. Resource-based tourism, scenic places, were valued. (5) Available public transportation for travel (airports, train stations etc.) are important. Most of these people travel.

**What was less important?** Living in proximity to rest of family was important, but not at the top of the list as long as a major airport was available to facilitate

visits with family members. We asked further, "Is it important to be close to kids?" They said, "No, not at all, we raised them, and we are happy for them to be adults. We want to see them when we want to see them." That was an eye opener. I'm used to thinking about it in the reverse perspective.

We also asked about detracting features in the new community. They did not really heavily criticize the community where they lived. They liked it, they felt welcome there. In general they felt safe there. They did voice complaints about the condition of the roads and potholes, and they did not like poor traffic control. One complaint we heard, rush hour traffic and crowds of tourists, was actually a conflict you need to be aware of. It can be demonstrated by

looking at Grove, Oklahoma. Grove, on Grand Lake, is a tourist area. Many retired to Grove because they had vacationed there during their working years, when they were in the thirty-forty-fifty-year age group with kids. They discovered Grand Lake while they were tourists, creating traffic jams, and annoying the natives! You can see the link between tourism and retirement, and you can see that the community has to be able to accommodate both. These older folks want a nice quiet trip to Wal-Mart or to the grocery store. It irritates them to have to fight the crowds and rush hour traffic.

Some detracting features were state-specific. We found that the retirees settling in Arkansas were more concerned with visiting family. They did not like being far

## Economic Impact of Retirees in County of Residence

Study Region	Retiree	Retiree	Expenditures	Jobs	Jobs
	Households	In-migrants	per Household	per Retiree	per Household
Cherokee, OK	14	27	\$26,791	0.48	0.93
Delaware, OK	20	40	20,062	0.28	0.55
Payne, OK	38	73	25,320	0.52	1.00
East Texas	25	45	29,138	0.58	1.00
Benton, AR	38	67	23,027	0.30	0.53
Garland, AR	25	46	24,249	0.35	0.64
Clark, AR	23	45	25,976	0.44	0.87
Florida	231,000	392,700	21,212	0.41	0.69

from family. In Texas, settlers were seeking better medical facilities. So there were variances across the communities and across the states, no consistent trend, it really depended on the unique characteristics of the community.

Retirees will not necessarily settle where they visit, but they can be influenced. In Tahlequah, Oklahoma, Cherokee County, we met with a group that had originally explored or settled in Arkansas as a result of efforts of Cooper Industries. This nationwide retirement planner has spent literally hundreds of thousands of dollars marketing across the U.S. to bring people to Arkansas to spend a weekend in a condo and take the tour and see about buying a plot of land. They didn't like the planned retirement community, but they liked the general region. They ended up settling in eastern Oklahoma where things were a little bit cheaper. This is a "spill-over" effect of marketing that should interest you as much as it interests Cooper Industries.

**The economic impact of these retirees is significant.** We looked at this in three ways: (1) the dollar purchases by sector in the economy, (2) how many of those purchases occur locally (within that county), and (3) an estimate of the impact on the local economy. We gave the retirees a nosy set of questions that I was just amazed that they took the time to fill out. But they did. The questions were in detailed

expense categories — taxes, housing, groceries, insurance, gifts, etc.

We assembled the dollar purchases data (1 above) by community and state, and averaged it for the three states. I will share the averaged portion with you. For example, on average across the three states, these retirees spent \$2,645 per year on housing, about 11% of their total annual budget. We did this for all categories and calculated a total average annual expenditure of \$24,942. We checked our numbers by taking the U.S. census household expenditure data broken down by age groups, and we found it is very similar to this. They were pretty much within reason for their age group.

We looked at category (2) above — how much do you spend within this county — because the county was going to be the unit of analysis. We found, for example, in Grove, Oklahoma, they make 90% of the lawn and garden purchases, 90% of the personal care, and 90% of grocery, household upkeep and utility expenditures locally. On average, across all those categories, about 74-75% of their total expenditures occurred within that residential county. The dollars not only were brought in by the retirees, but they were spending those dollars locally.

What does all that mean for the economic impact? We summarized the economic impact separately for the three counties in Oklahoma and the three.

counties in Arkansas, but included the three counties in East Texas together because that is the way my colleague in Texas did the analysis. The individual breakdown for the expenditures per household ran anywhere from \$20,000 up to \$29,000. The East Texas group tended to spend more, about \$29,000. The lowest was in Grove and Delaware County, about \$20,000, in terms of expenditures per household.

These expenditures should create jobs in the community. Using an input-output economic model that analyzes this information by sector to estimate the number of jobs that are dependent on that household expenditure, we estimated that the range of jobs created per retiree household was between one and one-half. In Benton, Arkansas, the estimate was 0.5 jobs per retiree household. Every time a retiree household moved in, it creates half a job, or two retiree households create one job. We compared that to some other studies. One study for the entire state of Florida used secondary data, census data, and this input-output analysis to estimate 0.69 or 0.7 jobs per retiree household. It is important to carefully calculate this figure to put the value of retirees in proper perspective. We had seen estimates that were much higher, between 4 and 10 jobs per retiree household, but our data did not show this. The community has to make decisions based on accurate data. Our figures provide a benchmark but you may want to gather your own

data. Our data does show economic activity associated with these retiree expenditures, and it is in the range of 0.5-1 job per retiree household.

This number depends upon the characteristics of the retirees — how much money they have and how they spend it — and the characteristics of the community — the population's characteristics and their demands for available services and retail facilities. These are different communities with different economic structures. For example, the opportunity to spend money is lower in Grove, Oklahoma, than in Stillwater, or Tahlequah. In Grove's smaller economy, certain things are simply not sold. The smaller economic impact is not surprising.

### Retirees and Tourism

We've learned that retirees are seeking mild climate, lower cost of living, quality housing at comparatively low cost, medical facilities, cultural and recreational opportunities, and services for seniors like public transportation or home health care. But, just as different tourism markets seek different tourism experiences, some retirees demand facilities like those along the Florida coast; others are seeking something a little different. You really need to understand your market and understand what retirees are seeking. That is why we did this survey. To understand your market, analyze the retirees already living in your commu-

nity — where they come from and why they came. The results will be unique in every community, so one of the first logical steps is to understand your market and your unique attributes.

How would you go about organizing to understand your market? It is similar to organizing for tourism development. You need a local organization to take the lead, providing stability and accepting responsibility. That could be a new organization or part of an existing organization. You need to conduct a community inventory to understand the strengths and the weaknesses that you might have in your community. (Simple steps but important steps like beautifying the area are very important.)

One other point learned from conversations with these retirees: resettlement wasn't a decision that was made two months before they moved. This was a decision that was made over a 10-15 year period. The husband and wife did a tremendous amount of research to decide where they wanted to locate, looking at this like a very important life decision or business decision. They started shopping around 15 years prior to retiring. A 45-year-old tourist coming through with a couple of kids in tow is a dual opportunity: profitable now for tourism dollars and possibly profitable 10-15 years from now as new residents. You must start planting that seed early because they are shopping around and thinking about it now.

Your community must be aware of this opportunity. Local awareness and support is very critical. Finding volunteers to pursue this particular line of endeavor is very important. Safe living conditions must be part of the whole experience.

Target your efforts. Grove, Oklahoma, chose Wichita and Kansas City to market efforts because that is where tourists are coming from. The next step is to go to Wichita and Kansas City and learn about these folks and their values. Make direct contacts in the appropriate age group and market to them. Coordinate with your overall tourism program, make this perhaps a part of the tourism effort within a community.

One method of doing this might be to offer free retirement vacation specials (essentially Cooper Industry's method of marketing Bella Vista and Hot Springs Village). A local Chamber of Commerce through some sort of tourism activity could do the same sort of thing, offering a free retirement vacation special for potential retirees. Develop an image for your community, whatever that image might be. And begin to develop the tools you might need, the brochures, the videos, and ads. Be sure you have an adequate budget. Projects like these cost money — for advertising, to find out who the people are, and then to directly recruit them.

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Clinton, Oklahoma, a western Oklahoma community, developed a brochure to market to those Oklahomans who had moved out west, especially to California. "Come home to Clinton, Oklahoma" suggesting folks come back to the home state to retire, targets those attending high school class reunions. The theme is used to advertise in California publications, and in magazines like *Modern Maturity* that retirees read. Another community targeted New York City police officers. They went to New York and worked directly with a retirement group — and they were successful.

We discovered that some tourism programs have a silver lining — people who enjoyed vacationing in certain areas so much that they migrate to those areas after retirement. Some communities have decided to develop this silver lining because retirees are valuable citizens as well as tourists. You need a plan, a careful survey, and a lot of effort.

## Success Stories

### High Hopes and Determination

by

Nancy Ting, Bayou Barn  
Jean Lafitte Tourist Commission

Jean Lafitte is a small fishing and shrimping community 20 miles south of New Orleans. Beautiful swamps and bayous north of the city are now a part of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park. I am very proud to live and work in this wonderful rural, southern part of our state. This is a success story about how a few interested business owners and an open-minded, new mayor were able to develop a tourist commission and budget for tourism development.

We had high hopes when we started into the tourism business in 1984. The World's Fair and the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park near our community gave us reason to believe tourists would be rolling in by the hundreds. My small business (we give swamp tours in canoes and we sponsor Cajun dancing on the banks of the bayou) and a few others expanded to try to reach these new tourists. We didn't have any idea what to do. Our initial efforts were not too successful; few tourists knew we were here and few in our community thought that tourists would be of any real benefit. I remember hearing more than once, "They only drive up and down the bayou, throw trash out the window, and never stop to

spend a dime in my store." We realized that people were driving through our town but not stopping in our community. Some were picnicking in the park and leaving their trash on the roadside. We wondered if they thought of us as the swashbuckling pirates of old. We were offended. In reality, they didn't know us. They didn't see any trash barrels. They had no reason to stop. The problem wasn't the tourists, the problem was ours. We forgot to introduce ourselves and put out the welcome mat!

I was fortunate to be advised to attend a Louisiana Travel Promotion Association meeting and heard about a rural tourism program. A few of us were determined to find out what other small towns were doing and achieving, and to share this information with our mayor and get our community involved.

The new mayor and clerk agreed to follow one of the suggested ideas we got from the meeting. They put together a list of existing businesses and natural resources that could be attractive to a tourist. The town approved a small budget to mail out letters asking local business owners what they could offer a tourist, and if they would

like to be listed in a city brochure. The response was very positive. People came forward and volunteered to help. Contacts were made door to door. A simple brochure was printed by the city in 1991. It lists all the businesses, all the personal services, churches, everything that might be of interest to a visitor.

That brochure was the turning point. This was our way to introduce ourselves. It united our community while it told tourists about the people of Jean Lafitte. For the first time, we learned what each of us has to offer. Besides, most people loved having their name in print. People began to ask what they could do to be included in this project. The brochure was updated in 1992, and again recently. We, in fact, now have 50,000 brochures almost ready to be put out in the Louisiana Travel and Promotion Association locations across the state.

During this process, we organized a tourist commission, using information made available by LSU Sea Grant and the Louisiana Office of Tourism. We wrote out our training guide and spent many hours brainstorming.

This group now works with the local government to promote tourism. Today more than 20 members pay dues to sponsor community promotional projects. The city of Jean Lafitte has a Tourist Information Center and a tourism budget. Historical signs and a driving tour map are planned for 1994-95. It takes volunteers and local government to be successful.

Through networking and education, the community has recognized tourism as a tool for growth and unity. Thanks to the rural tourism program, our welcome mat is out.

## A Unique Wildlife Park

by

Paula Finley

Public Relations Director  
Global Wildlife Center

Because my background is in marketing and public relations and I provide those services for Global Wildlife Center (GWC), I approach the success of the center from that perspective. We asked ourselves a question that you need to ask yourselves: "What makes me different?" "What do I have to offer that nobody else offers to the consumer or the visitor?" If you cannot answer that question, you're in deep trouble. You have to know what you're offering, then you have to determine who would be interested in those unique qualities, and then you have to market that to the people who want what you have.

GWC is entering its fourth year of business, and the staff as well as the board of directors have always been aware of our unique characteristics. 1) There are only three centers in the U.S. that share our approach to wildlife preservation with emphasis on education. The center is not a drive-through park. 2) Our location is remote. We have now reached attendance of approximately 300,000 per year. The school groups, senior groups, and the general population within a two-hour drive total about 4.5 million. 3) The center is a non-profit organization instead of a commercial venture.

We use these characteristics to be successful. The first characteristic — an education facility instead of a drive-through park — actually presents us with a challenge. In the U.S., some drive-through parks do not take good care of their animals, creating a negative reputation to potential visitors. We spent the first two years letting people know that we care about our animals, and we want to share our knowledge about our animals with everyone. Every GWC tour is a guided tour to educate visitors about the animals, their habitats, and wildlife preservation in general. We used media exposure and grass roots interaction with the community to spread this word.

Our remote location is actually logical. It would be difficult to build our center in downtown Lafayette, Baton Rouge, Monroe, or New Orleans. But this remote location within a two-hour drive for 4.5 million people is a huge advantage. To help people find the center, we print maps on everything we distribute, even the cups we give visitors to feed the animals. We use billboards as effectively as possible. We are still trying to get a highway sign on I-12 at the Robert Exit.

Like every tourism business, we welcome media attention. Magazine or television features tell people about our park and our animals. Because GWC is nonprofit, media can't be accused of promoting our business over another one. I brought with me a few examples of the recognition that results from this status. *New Orleans Magazine* pretty regularly runs some type of little article about us. This Sunday travel section out of the *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* has a full page with some additional coverage on the inside cover. This was in the entertainment section of the *Shreveport* newspaper. We have been in *Tour and Travel*, *Motorcycle Tour and Travel*, a national publication. We have been in *Weekend America*. We have been in *Touring America*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Los Angeles Times* and then just this summer, we were featured in *Southern Living Magazine*. Media contact is established through a media kit. Ours is a folder with one-page information sheets inside that we can change without a lot of cost. You might find a sheet about our business, a map, a few fact sheets featuring particular animals or events in an animal's life. We send new sheets to our local media regularly. But we mail media kits out to specific targets too. For example, we looked at the *Saints* football schedule, and *Tulane* and *Loyola*'s football and basketball schedules and mailed a kit to every newspaper of every visiting team to the city of *New Orleans*. This year we are going to do the same thing in *Baton Rouge* for *LSU*, South-

ern, etc. You would be amazed how often those long shots are payoffs for you.

In keeping with our education mission, our staff and our board of directors are focused on service. We want every visitor to GWC to leave happy, feeling like they have learned something, and feeling the warmth of the hospitality of our staff. People learn best when they are comfortable. That is exceedingly important to us. If we make a mistake or disrupt a visitor's good time in some way, he or she will probably be given a pass (with a map on it) to come back and see us again, freq.

Service extends to our community. Our community is certainly *Hammond*, but it is also an area extending from *Mobile*, *Alabama*, to *Lafayette*, *Louisiana*, to *Jackson*, *Mississippi*, to the *Gulf of Mexico*. We approach every request for an educational program — at a meeting, a fair, a school — positively. If we can't go to them, they may be able to come to us. We say "No" only when we have absolutely no other choice. Give back to the community at every opportunity. Someone hearing a program in one of our communities is going to stop at the GWC when he's in this area, or is going to plan a family vacation to see the facility.

Finally, answering the question "what makes me different, what do I have to offer" is never completely answered. Never quit learning. Listen to everyone's comments and ideas. There is always a way to develop

an idea to mutually benefit all parties. Keep examining your assets. Turn negatives (like a remote location) into positives. All of our staff and board members, especially since Global Wildlife Center is only three years old, learn on a daily basis. We don't intend to stop learning, and we urge you to do the same.

## Vermilion Parish . . . Pulling Groups Together

by

Rochelle Michaud Dugas  
Abbeville

Pulling groups together is not always easy, particularly in tourism development when you're concentrating on community and economic development. As we developed in Vermilion, we formed a sense of community and designed a plan for tourism which we knew would result in economic benefits.

When the Vermilion Parish Tourist Commission was formed, members were appointed from all areas of the parish. While we were all representing the parish as a whole, we each had a special interest and/or need for that area. We knew what was good for Abbeville, was good for Vermilion, was good for Acadiana, and was good for Louisiana, and visa versa. But we had no definition of what was good. So pulling them together, you might say, was like pulling teeth. It was not all fun and games. Sometimes it was a bit painful, but the results were rewarding.

In March of 1992, the Vermilion Parish Tourist Commission was formed. We went through the legalities: we were appointed, the hotel/motel tax was put into place, our bylaws were established. We then wondered, "Now what?" We all knew that we needed that dollar flow, that Vermilion needed economic benefits. We had

many things out there, but we had nothing that was bringing us together. We realized that we must utilize our resources not only correctly, but jointly.

Ninety-five percent of the people of Vermilion Parish said the next step should be a brochure. They wanted to see some product; they wanted to see immediate results. As a tourist commission, we knew a brochure was needed but we also knew that we weren't quite ready to produce one. We knew that "No man is an island," that we needed help from the community and the expertise of other persons in the tourism field. A good plan of action was needed.

An intense process of organizing and planning began with a comprehensive inventory of Vermilion Parish. We identified our strengths and our weaknesses, categorized our tourism assets seasonally and geographically. Through this process we rediscovered that we had so much in Vermilion Parish — quantity, quality, uniqueness, and authenticity.

At the same time, we began to form partnerships — just as important as the resource identify process. In over two and a half years we have formed well over 50 partnerships vital to our success and growth. I would like to touch on a few.

One of the most important is a partnership with the community. The Vermilion Parish Tourist Commission held town meetings across the parish describing what we were doing, seeking consensus on the direction in tourism the community wanted to take. We went to each of the municipalities so that a large majority of the people of the parish were involved.

Next we formed a partnership with existing business. Those in business in Vermilion Parish had to understand that our growth as a travel destination and as a community would provide economic benefits — only with their cooperation. Existing business had to be involved.

Education was added for the tourist commissioners and for the community. Everyone had to learn about tourism. In that process, we relied heavily on many educational institutions — USL, LSU, UNO, with our local school board, our elementary, our middle, our high school students as well as our Gulf Area Vocational Institute, and Lafayette Regional Institute. The tourist commission, businesses, citizens, and attractions needed to learn about tourism, tourist business, hospitality, and community development. Everyone needed to learn that a tourist will not return to a community where he/she is not properly welcomed in stores and service stations, or where he/she cannot get directions from a passer-by on the street. Hospitality training to our community made everyone realize

that tourists, like local people, will return to a place where they feel comfortable.

Government partnerships are important. We need the support of our government officials — locally, on the state level, and federally. Government programs can assist financially and in terms of providing legislation, moral support, and city services — without which most tourist programs cannot exist. An interesting example of this partnership has been Abbeville's designation as a Main Street community. It led to partnerships with the Office of Historic Preservation and the results, although located in Abbeville, benefit the entire parish.

We formed a relationship with the media. This gave reporters access to news on our activities while it raised public awareness of the Vermilion Parish Tourist Commission and its developments. The media is able to report correct information to their readers, listeners, and viewers while serving as a sounding board on our plans. Pros and cons come out.

Never discount youth — a partnership that is essential. Their ideas are bright; youth are refreshing; they have loads of energy. The Abbeville Junior Ambassadors, funded through the city of Abbeville and the Louisiana Division of the Arts, began youth cultural tours of Abbeville's historic district. We educated 24 children on the history and culture of Abbeville, Vermilion

Parish, Acadiana, and Louisiana. In turn, the knowledge which they gained through 'hands-on' experiences can be shared with young and old.

It has been a little over two years since our inception, and we have only just completed our first phase of development. The alliances and partnerships that developed contributed to our progress. We have strengthened the parish and built a tourist commission that is working for us.

Now, after two and a half years, we have just unveiled our brochure — in fact two brochures, one highlighting Vermilion Parish and one highlighting the City of Abbeville. Vermilion Parish has never had

a brochure promoting tourism, and Abbeville has not had a brochure in over 12 years. These brochures are testimony to the meaning of partnership. They resulted from a partnership of the parish, the city, the tourist commission, The Main Street Program, local photographers, the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism and their advertising agency, The Peter Mayer and Graham Groups. It has not been easy, but it is a wonderful partnership. As we have pulled these groups together, we have grown as a tourist commission and as a community. We have built our "house," and we welcome you all to come and visit us.

## Use Natural Treasures

by

Allen May

Field Trip Coordinator, The Nature Conservancy's Little Pecan Island Preserve  
Cameron Parish

The Nature Conservancy of Louisiana is a private sector conservation organization with approximately 5,000 members in the state. In 1988, we purchased Little Pecan Island in Cameron Parish in an effort to protect Louisiana's chenier plain. This 1,800-acre preserve in southwest Louisiana is the only fully protected chenier in the country. The Little Pecan Island Preserve is an amalgamation of freshwater marsh, hardwood forest, and cypress swamp surrounded by marsh. This island in the marsh is extremely important ecologically for neotropical migratory birds that utilize the hardwood forest to rest and feed during their migration across the Gulf of Mexico. The freshwater marsh, the upland chenier ridges, and the cypress swamp create a diversity of habitat attracting a number of different species — water birds, birds of prey, alligators, and a variety of other marsh species.

This high quality nature area also attracts naturalists and birders. When we purchased this island in 1988, we wanted to use the island for an ecologically benign activity — we did not want to develop the island further, we wanted to preserve it. Two years ago we began a program to bring bird watchers and ecotours from across the

country to Little Pecan Island to experience the marshes and chenier habitats of Louisiana. We provide naturalist guides, Cajun cooking, and a strong message of conservation. The Conservancy uses the revenue from these trips to fund stewardship and protection projects on the preserve. Once here, our guests generally travel throughout Louisiana to experience the state's natural and cultural heritage.

One of our greatest challenges is our ability to utilize the local economy to its fullest while minimizing the costs involved with maintaining a professionally run program. Accessible only by boat and aircraft, the island-based program sustains the high costs of servicing our lodge and equipment in a remote area. Attempts to hire locally for guest services have been unsuccessful, and we instead must look to volunteers and staff to carry out domestic duties. Our staff members include ecologists, botanists, and scientists that find themselves leading tours and washing dishes.

We are able to advertise nationally through our national magazine as well as our statewide newsletter, and then we advertise directly with specialty outdoor shops and different clothing stores in the state.

**Ecotourists come from all over the country to experience the preserve. And they don't just come to Little Pecan Island and leave. Informal surveys let us know they usually come for a week, and they usually want to know the locations of other natural areas in the state. We work with other tour programs throughout the state, giving out brochures to let our guests know the locations of other natural areas.**

**Our project has been successful. We have made money. Because we are a non-profit conservation organization, we apply the revenue from the tours into protection and stewardship on the island. We are currently involved in two stewardship**

**projects. One is a hardwood restoration project. We are replanting about 3,000 hardwood trees over a three-year period in 10-acre parcels. We also have a freshwater marsh management plan utilizing an existing levy-weir system.**

**We would like to have a closer relationship with the people in the Cameron Parish community. They are our neighbors. We want to be their friends. We also recognize that to garner local support for conservation and protection of Louisiana's natural character, we must find a way to utilize fully the local economy. That is our goal: to use Little Pecan Island to demonstrate that conservation is good business.**

## Benefits of Government Support in Rural Tourism Development: Case Study-Opelousas

by  
Mayor John Joseph  
City of Opelousas

In the 1986 city elections, John W. Joseph became the first black person to be elected mayor of Opelousas in the city's 267 years of history. It was a time when federal revenue sharing and state tobacco tax revenues had just been reduced, and we were experiencing an upturn in the cost of operating local government. I realized at that time that the tourism industry was the third largest industry in Louisiana, and it represented a viable alternative to supplementing municipal revenues. At the very first council meeting, our city created the Opelousas Tourism and Activities Committee (OTAC). This 14-citizen group was defined as a public/private partnership to create, organize, and plan events and activities, to study the area and determine the potential for tourism development, to promote the area to potential residents and to visitors, and to work with all other groups in an on-going effort to build a tourism industry in Opelousas.

Since its creation, OTAC has grown. Following initial organization, the group selected projects, appointed committees and formed a non-profit corporation, Poste Des Opelousas Inc. The corporation has open membership so that any person in Opelousas who wants to work towards the betterment

of the community or towards tourism development is welcomed. This grassroots organization has no dues, and everyone in the community is encouraged to participate. Today, the membership numbers hundreds, and many subcommittees work independently and together for the promotion of Opelousas.

When the tourism group was formed, the city did not have a budget item for tourism, although today it is a line item in the annual budget. The Opelousas Museum and Interpretive Center is a separate line item. Together these two have an annual appropriation from the city of about \$176,000.

This committee has produced many products to promote Opelousas. Seventeen pieces of literature have been written about our city. We have 3 videos — one 14-minute, one 9-minute, and one, a 30-second public service announcement — that are used in our tourism information centers. Our brochures have been distributed through the tourist information centers and throughout this nation. As a result of the ads that we have purchased in many publications, we have been noticed and featured by national magazine sections or newspapers and television stations.

These efforts have paid off. In 1980, 3,899 people signed the register book at the Opelousas Tourist Information Center; in 1992, 10,081 people signed; in 1993, 10,184. The Opelousas Museum and Interpretive Center reports over 9,000 signatures on its register book from September 1992 through September 1994. The increase in tourism has led to a boost to our economy. In 1992, the travel and tourism industry in our parish (St. Landry) employed 230 people and generated a payroll of \$2,920,000. The state tax receipts in St. Landry Parish for that year amounted to \$1,540,000 and local government benefitted by \$880,000 in taxes. When we compared September 1994 with with September 1993, we found an 11% increase in sales tax revenues. In fact, since 1990, we have seen a consistent increase in sales tax revenues in Opelousas, and that is a very good indicator of the economy of our city.

The population, which is another good indicator, shows growth. Since the latest census was taken in 1990, we have seen a significant population increase in Opelousas (bases on unofficial updates we receive from the Census Bureau). We had 179 new business starts in 1993-94.

Tourism also serves our citizens. The Opelousas Museum and Interpretive Center tells our story — the history of our city.

My parents told me it is honorable to serve people, and it is a duty of mankind to help people. I find this reflected in the people involved in tourism in Opelousas. Some people who were not involved in this city, but who had talents, are now voluntarily working for the community. I am proud of our community, and I know that each citizen in Opelousas is also proud of his community.

## Volunteers Make A Difference

by  
Sue Norman  
Minden

The role of volunteers is vitally important in tourism development. To give you a little background: Minden is an old town in Webster Parish which is home today for about 15,000. It was settled in 1836 by a Mr. Veeder who laid it out in a parallelogram. The design gives us a beautiful boulevard lined with lovely old homes and churches, and our business district still has the original brick streets. Our historical residential district is listed on the National Register. These are a few of our tourist attractions, but our volunteers bring the people to town to see them.

In January 1991, we attended the LTPA Travel and Tourism Summit. One of the breakout sessions, "What Sporting Events Can Do To Your Town," described a triathlon — a three-sport race: swim, bike, and run. We knew nothing about a triathlon, but we knew we had a lake. In August of that year, we held the triathlon with the help of at least 100 volunteers. Although we went into debt by about \$500, we had fun and we received excellent publicity including TV coverage from Shreveport. The next year, we lost only about \$300, and in 1994, made over \$1,000 profit which we will use to make our 1995 race even better. Many people have found

out that Minden is the place to be on Saturday morning, the third weekend in August. Those who came for a race learned about our town, and some visited our attractions.

Events such as this can have an impact on the local economy. The first two years we had to let our race management office purchase our trophies. In 1994, we purchased them from a local merchant who offered a competitive price and outstanding product. When the race was over, an athlete from Lake Charles went to our local merchant and placed an order for plaques for a triathlon in his town.

To successfully recruit and keep volunteers, the primary ingredient is your enthusiasm. You must believe in what you are doing, and your volunteers must want to participate. The worst thing to do is to line up volunteers and then have nothing for them to do.

Right now in Minden, we are recruiting volunteers for our second Pow-Wow. In the summer of 1993, the Twin Eagles Intertribal Pow-Wow was organized. This year, we expect 15-20,000 people the weekend of November 5-6 in Minden. Volunteers suggested the pow-wow and,

without them, we could not accommodate so many visitors.

Events like the triathlon and the pow-wow let people know about our town. Back in the spring, a rather large RV group contacted us because they were looking for a place for a Christmas rally. They had learned about us from another group like this (100 RVs), which incidentally spent \$87,000 in our town over a four day period. Since this group is coming for Christmas, our downtown merchant organization changed the date of our civic Christmas

celebration to entertain these visitors. Another volunteer, the owner of one of our antebellum homes, will open her home for this group to tour and have a Christmas tea. We will suggest that they do an ornament exchange during the tea, and many will probably buy the ornaments in our gift shops. They'll have a good time, spend a little money, perhaps even visit other tourist attractions. All this is done because the good people of Minden volunteer to host visitors. When we need help, they come forth for us.