



Success Stories

SEVENTH LOUISIANA RURAL TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT CONFERENCE

Thibodaux, Louisiana
October 16-17, 1997

LOAN COPY ONLY

SUCCESS STORIES

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SPONSORS

Louisiana Sea Grant College Program
Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism
Louisiana Travel Promotion Association

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THE CHALLENGES OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN LOUISIANA

In the last decade or so, travelers have begun to look for more than traditional tourist experiences. They seem to want to participate as well as observe and be entertained. In their search for unique sites and experiences, many have been drawn to picturesque natural habitats and distinct or different cultures. The tourism industry has used phrases like ecotourism, wilderness or adventure travel, green tourism, responsible, heritage or cultural tourism to characterize these experiences.

Travelers coming to Louisiana have found that the state's unique cultural gumbo and diverse ecological regime provides an excellent environment for many tourism and outdoor attractions, activities, and experiences. The Louisiana Sea Grant College Program has adopted the term "nature-based tourism" in referring to this type of tourism. Nature-based tourism (NBT) depends on the environmental features (both cultural and natural) of an area to attract and entertain visitors. Those activities like hunting and fishing that use some of this environment are called consumptive NBT; those that do not, like birding, photography, and swamp tourism, are called non-consumptive NBT.

To be successful, both consumptive and nonconsumptive tourism businesses must be sustainable for future generations. To do this, (1) the visitors and communities must both appreciate an area's natural and cultural resources, and (2) all must have the desire to conserve those natural and cultural resources.

Proof that NBT is growing in the state is clear. The Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism as well as other state agencies, cooperating with local tourism bureaus and the Louisiana Travel Promotion Association are exploring new initiatives designed to attract visitors seeking outdoor experiences. Their efforts are based upon a variety of reliable resources. The preliminary "1996 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation" estimated that 1.2 million Louisianians enjoy the state's outdoors. This includes over 800,000 individuals engaging in non-consumptive uses such as observing and photographing plants and wildlife or visiting public parks and other natural areas. Louisiana also has 3,100 square miles of surface water area that attracts thousands of anglers and boaters. Between 1989 and 1995, the annualized growth rate in saltwater recreational

fishing licenses was six percent. Combination freshwater and saltwater recreational fishing licenses for residents and nonresidents for fiscal year 1997 totaled about 540,000, and the total number of boats registered in 1996 was over 320,000. Charter fishing trips have also been increasing, and the latest figures indicate that approximately 60,000 nearshore and inland saltwater charter fishing trips were taken in 1995, thanks in large measure to our comparatively outstanding fishing opportunities and generous bag limits. A survey of swamp tour operators conducted by Louisiana Sea Grant during the summer of 1997 noted that about 70 percent of the 43 operations have been in existence for less than ten years. These numbers show that the people of this state value their environment and want to share their treasures with visitors.

However, tourism development must proceed cautiously in the face of several major challenges. The first is one that we appear to be tackling quite satisfactorily—our overall responsible competitiveness when marketing the industry. The statistics for the last three to four years appear to indicate that our efforts to attract more visitors through increased out-of-state promotion have materialized and that economic benefits are accruing to our communities and businesses.

The second challenge is more complex and sensitive because it focuses on

our priorities with each attraction and with NBT in Louisiana as a whole. Our cultural and natural resources distinguish our state from all others. For NBT to be sustained, we need to adopt and practice an ethic of conservation, preservation, authenticity, and quality when developing and operating every nature-based tourism endeavor in the state. We must insure that each endeavor is compatible with the social, cultural, and environmental fabric of the state as a whole. Otherwise, we risk creating development characterized by contentious, often irreconcilable resource-allocation disputes, conflicts within the community and with our visitors, additional burdens on infrastructure and services, and of course, irreparable damages to our fragile natural environment and distinct culture.

The third challenge is not nearly as daunting as the second or as simple as the first. It requires that we recognize and accept the second challenge, and then respond by undertaking public and private initiatives that clearly address the needed balance between compatibility and development. Such a response requires innovative thinking and a creative blend of conservation and development. It might well entail new criteria, new policies, new legislation, but most assuredly will require a renewed commitment to cooperation and joint planning on the part of all interested parties.

STRONG TOWN PRIDE IN LOCAL HISTORY

Merryville Historical Society

by
Keitha C. Donnelly

The Merryville Historical Society was formed as an outgrowth of the bicentennial celebration of 1976. The small Sabine River community is proud of its heritage and sought a plan for the preservation of that heritage for future generations.

Once a bustling town with three sawmills, various mercantile stores, and three car dealerships, Merryville currently struggles to provide the necessary community services. The saddest day comes to many families when their children must leave Merryville to seek employment elsewhere.

Painstakingly, the original members of the Historical Society began to create an historic district. The town can now boast of three different types of museums in the downtown area. First, they acquired the 1883 Burks Log Cabin which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Next, there was the construction of a gallery museum, housing an eclectic array of Merryville-related artifacts. Finally, there was the 1989 addition of the Battle of Bear Head Creek living history event.

In 1981 the Historical Society purchased land for Burks Log Cabin, which had been donated by descendants of Andrew Jackson Burks. Moving the cabin to its current site became a community project.

The Historical Society gallery museum was dedicated in 1988. Built from monies collected through the purchase of "memorial" logs, the gallery was opened to house artifacts donated or loaned by local residents. These were items of importance not only to individual family histories, but also significant to the area's history. Each year over 3,000 visitors pass through these volunteer-staffed doors.

The last weekend in February, we cosponsor the Living History Heritage Weekend. This name was chosen to encompass not only the re-enactment, but the Indian American people and the Black Americans who are a vital part of the ethnic framework of the Merryville community. A special attraction for students during Heritage Weekend is the "Infohunt". The purpose behind Infohunt is to enable students to participate in an enjoyable learning

activity which uncovers information and interesting facts about our local heritage.

The Historical Society has begun offering an educationally oriented Merryville Heritage Series, funded by the Southwest Louisiana Arts and Humanities Decentralized Grants. This year, five presentations focusing either on storytelling or earth arts employed knowledgeable local artists. The response from the students has encouraged us to continue another series in the fall. The purpose for both the Living Heritage Weekend and the Merryville Heritage Series is to offer a way for students and current residents

of Merryville to learn how the early residents used the natural resources of the area in their daily lives.

The dedicated members of the Merryville Historical Society, both past and present, are proud of their museums, and most notably, the fact that there are no state or federal funds connected with the Museum. We do it ourselves—one dollar at a time. We would like to acknowledge the support of the Beauregard Tourist Commission in nominating our organization as a success story, and accept the award in the name of all volunteers, both past and present, associated with the Merryville Historical Society.

PRESERVING HISTORY THROUGH ALL THE SENSES

by

M. Leroy Harvey, Jr.

Jackson

Many years ago there was a radio drama program that told the story of a man who enhances all of his five senses by allowing himself to be deprived of each of his senses, one at a time. When his eyes were blindfolded for a long period of time, his sense of hearing, smell, and touch became heightened just as a blind person adjusts. The premise of the story was that as each of his five senses was increased, by this training, he seemed to develop a sixth sense of predicting the future.

As we relate this story to our historic preservation and restoration efforts, we begin to understand that we need this sixth sense of visualizing and predicting the future of our small towns in Louisiana. We are blessed with a rich and culturally diverse heritage, some areas more than others, but each of our small communities has an interesting story to tell. We need to visualize our area as a tourist would see us and work to improve those things that detract from our best image.

In my home town of Jackson we have a population of only 3,000, but we have a very interesting story to tell if we

can get visitors to stop and listen. Just as in the story of Cinderella nobody noticed her when her face was dirty and she was on her knees in ragged clothing. But later, thanks to her fairy godmother, she was clean, beautifully attired, and became the belle of the ball. This same transformation can take place in many of our communities in Louisiana. But we have to realize that to make it happen the "Fairy Godmothers R US" magic wand is hard work, perseverance, leadership, and of course, our resources (money). Large amounts of money make it happen faster. All of us have seen the amazing results of dedication and perseverance.

There are many ways we can make our communities interesting to tourists and economic development; start a local museum, encourage special overnight guest facilities (B&Bs), have special homemade products for sale (winery), special events (festivals), visual history displays, antique shops, tourist rides (railroad, carriage, etc.), and performing art centers.

All of these things we are attempting to do in Jackson, Louisiana.

Historic preservation efforts have been going on for a long time in our community, but about ten years ago our efforts intensified with the opening of our museum and "Old Hickory Village." This effort has had a galvanizing effect on our community as more people become believers and want to become involved. Our budding flower is not yet in full bloom, but we are definitely on our way. We invite you to visit and see for yourself.

ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

by
Richard Seale

Natchitoches

In February 1995, I secured a position with the Office of State Parks as Curator of the Louisiana Country Music Museum at Rebel State Commemorative Area (SCA) in Marthaville. Currently, I am manager of both Rebel SCA and Fort St. Jean Baptiste SCA in Natchitoches. Fort St. Jean Baptiste is a replica 18th century French fort that presents living history programs on life in colonial Louisiana. Early on I realized that visitation to these state facilities was directly tied to the number of tourists visiting Natchitoches Parish, so I became a commissioner on the Natchitoches Parish Tourist Commission. Involvement in the commission and service on the commission's advertising committee gives me the opportunity to directly influence the growth of Natchitoches Parish tourism. Despite some reports that indicate a drop in local tourism nationwide, sales receipts from the shops in downtown Natchitoches indicate that day visits to the area are on the rise. Many B&Bs in town are booked to capacity much of the year, especially during weekends that feature a special event.

Special events are vital to attracting visitors to the area. I had worked for several years with the Natchitoches/NSU Folk Festival, one of the top twenty events in the south. The Folk Festival, along with the Melrose Arts and Crafts Fair, the October Pilgrimage and Parade of Homes, and the Natchitoches Christmas Festival draw many thousands of visitors to Natchitoches Parish annually. Taking my cue from the success of these events, I developed "Music on Main Street", a live radio concert series. "Music on Main Street" features the best of the abundant music talent that resides in Natchitoches Parish. This program is made possible by the Decentralized Arts Funding Program (DAF), the Louisiana Division of the Arts, and regional arts councils. These grants provide full funding and are relatively easy to obtain. Their main requirements are a clear vision of the project you wish to promote, a good budget, and community involvement. The first year of "Music on Main Street" was a great success. This year we repeated the program series to standing room only

audiences and a large group of radio listeners. The 1998 season, with continued support of the DAF and active community support, promises to surpass our previous efforts.

Major event productions take time, planning, and a large support group to be successful, however, the payoff in increased tourism is worth the effort. Yet, less intensive projects can also create positive results. For the past two years I have conducted reading/study classes through the Louisiana Library Association in Vernon and Rapides parishes. The subjects ranged from Louisiana history to the Indians of the Southeast. These classes generate interest among the participants to learn their own family history. Several people interested in finding their native American or colonial French family roots have visited the Natchitoches Parish Genealogical Library to use their excellent resources. Although few in

number compared to a major event, these visitors carry home a new awareness of Natchitoches and a positive image of the parish. Many later return with family or friends to experience the other tourist attractions in the area.

Some people accuse me of being an obsessed workaholic by taking on these extra duties, however I disagree. I still think of myself as generally lazy. I only do projects that are fun, make me feel good, and that fit into my work schedule. Yet, I believe I have helped, in a small way, to increase tourist visitation to the parish. These efforts have, in turn, helped me reach my original goal of attracting more visitors to Fort St. Jean Baptiste SCA and Rebel SCA. If a lazy person can find time and energy to do a bit extra, just imagine what truly motivated people like you can do for your community.

MAKE IT EASY AND THEY WILL STAY

by

Mayor Jim P. Petitjean

City of Rayne

During the spring of 1994 a group of Rayne residents approached city officials about constructing a campground site on city property located next to Interstate 10 in Rayne. According to the group, various recreational vehicle clubs were always searching for available sites to host their respective conventions and/or rallies.

The residents pointed out that Rayne has the perfect location for several reasons. First, being located immediately off the I-10 exit meant easy access for recreational vehicles. Second the spacious Rayne Civic Center, located near the proposed camper site, would provide a perfect place for meetings; and also, because of the amount of land available, a state-of-the-art RV park could be constructed.

The City administration immediately researched the proposal and found that it had great economic possibilities for our community in that it would bring an influx of people into Rayne at various times of the year. These rallies usually have approximately 300 campers attending, with an average rally lasting five nights and six days.

During their visits these campers patronize the local stores, restaurants, beauty shops, etc. The business community really fell in love with the idea. Furthermore, the Rayne Chamber of Commerce agreed to help organize tours of the Acadiana area, and local civic clubs volunteered to cater various functions held during the different rallies.

With this in mind, we contacted different knowledgeable people and enlisted their expertise on how best to construct this campsite. Owning our own electrical, water and sewer facilities was instrumental in keeping costs down, since city crews would perform all needed labor.

The initial plans called for a 350-unit park equipped with electrical, water, and sewer dump station facilities. Construction began in September 1994 with completion on January 31, 1995. Each trailer space is rented for \$10.00 per day. This is negotiable depending on the size of the group and the length of stay. In addition, the city also rents the Civic Center for rally activities.

Business was so good that 202 additional spots were added in time for planned rallies in March 1997. As part of our ongoing growth, 60 spots were added during the month of August 1997. Part of the cost for this addition was paid through the proceeds of a \$75,000 USDA Rural Development Business Enterprise grant. It allowed for the purchase of limestone, which formed the base in which the RVs park, and it also allowed the City of Rayne to make drainage improvements. To date the city has invested \$103,173 in this project. We hosted our first rally during the last week of February 1995. Forty-one different states and Canada were represented at one of the rallies held during March 1996. Through August 1, 1997, revenues in excess of \$135,252 have been collected. In less than three years, the city has recovered its entire investment.

The city administration is really excited about this project. It has achieved its purpose of bringing tourism into the area throughout the year. The business community has experienced increased activity during each rally. Most importantly, the city has found a method of increasing revenues at no cost to the taxpayer.

The Rayne campground offers a state-of-the art location to any group to

host a rally. Reasonable rates, excellent meeting facilities, and easy access make this site second to none for those interested in experiencing our unique Acadiana traditions in addition to their convention activities.

We built it and they have come—we expanded it and they have continued to come—service has made them return customers.

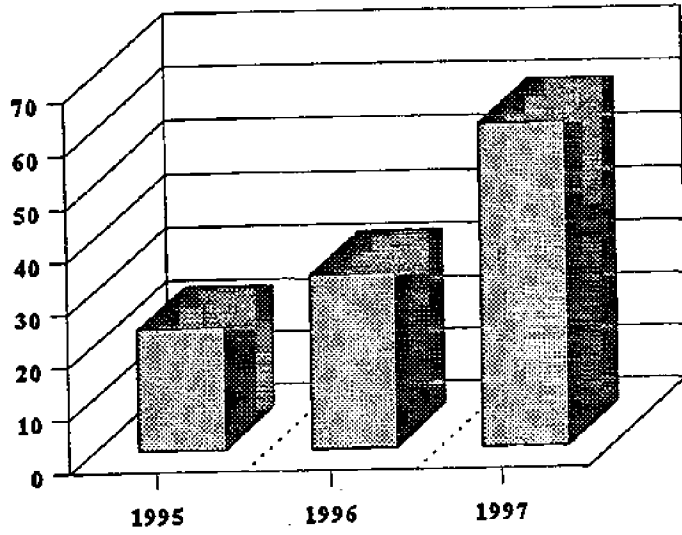
Total nights spent at City of Rayne RV Park

Nights	
1995	4,108
1996	6,255
1997	10,050

Total campers that spent nights at City of Rayne RV Park

Campers	
1995	680
1996	1,145
1997	2,032

**Nights spent per group at
City of Rayne RV Park**



ANSWERING THE CALL OF THE WILD

Wildlife Gardens

by

James and Betty Provost

Wildlife Gardens was established in 1986 out of need. When the economy of the 1980s began to decline, we along with everyone, were affected. James had operated a small construction company with his dad. Our paycheck was cut in half and we saw that some changes had to be made. But a hobby of raising exotic birds was one thing we did not want to give up. We saw a small article in *The Courier* placed by the Terrebonne Parish Tourist Center (headed at the time by Betty Reed). It asked if anyone had anything of interest to tourists, please contact them. We did so and Wildlife Gardens was born.

Without the encouragement and direction of the Terrebonne Parish Tourist Center, we would not have known where to begin. At the time I thought marketing was going to the grocery store. I was thrown into the business with people with marketing degrees, and needless to say, I was scared to death.

At the time there were not as many attractions as there are today. People would come mainly to visit

Annie Miller's Swamp Tour. But while they were here they wanted to see other things.

We realized very soon that if you did not have alligators you did not have tourists. They would ask, do you have alligators? When we said no, they left. So the alligator farm was started. Tourists do not come to see peacocks or pheasants. They want to see native animals, the swamps and the people.

With my reluctance and James' determination, we purchased some land adjacent to ours and developed a walk through the swamp. With knowledge of the land and time on his hands, James worked faithfully. With love of the land, the property slowly grew to an area of wild irises in the spring, baby deer in the summer, and hatchling alligators in the fall.

A movie was produced in the Houma area in 1987, "Three on a Match". A lovely building from the movie was given to us. James took it apart and moved it to Wildlife Gardens. It became a trapper's cabin. People would walk with me and say, "We would like to sleep here. You need to fix

it up." So again we decided to add a bed and breakfast cabin.

We renovated our barn into a small cafe for breakfast. It is wonderful to sit at the table with four countries represented, and learn different cultures especially since we have never seen a mountain or flown in a plane.

I get many cards saying, "Betty, here is your mountain," or "this is what snow looks like". We even received a pair of wooden shoes from Holland. This makes what we do very special.

Our generation will be the last to remember the trapping and fishing era, so it is our duty to keep this alive in our children's minds. Thus, we have also made a museum in honor of the lives of our grandparents and great grandparents. I can envision them on every tour I give through Wildlife Gardens.

RESTORING AND FILLING A NICHE

Laura: A Creole Plantation

by

Norman Marmillion

On August 10, 1993, my wife, Sand, and I signed a long-term lease for Laura Plantation which, by expert advice, was six months from falling down. Somewhere among the ruins of her 27 buildings we saw a future for this, one of the last remaining Creole plantations in Louisiana. All we knew of her past was that in Laura's standing slave cabins were recorded, for the first time in America, the stories of the west-African folk hero, Compair Lapin, the clever hare known to English speakers around the globe as Br'er Rabbit. With this understanding and the hunch that Laura could join in the thriving B&B trade of Louisiana's rural areas, we quit jobs, wrote an 80-page business plan, found 30 investors, raised \$250,000 in restoration capital, placed 12 of her buildings on the National Register, and began the business. It would be a quest and a passion to last the rest of our lives.

For 10 years prior to this signing, I was president of the historical society for the River Parishes, trying to stop the rapid loss of the area's architectural treasures. Naysayers advised us to allow Laura, covered under 14 inches of

cow manure and trash, to fall. Amid skepticism from a host of "experts", we relied on our own market research. Two years before, we had queried visitors in parking lots at historic sites. Their responses showed us two clear needs: visitors wanted to experience how people actually lived in the past, and visitors wanted to be entertained.

In our search for authenticity, we interviewed every person we could find who was associated with the plantation. We combed civil and church records, archives, libraries, photo albums, trunks, maps, address books and finally located Laura's sole descendant, living in Missouri. Through him we met others, friends and friends of friends of Laura's children until PAYDIRT: thousands of pages of documents of Laura's family in the National Archives in Paris and the dramatic "Memories of My Old Plantation Home", written by Laura, detailing 200 years of the lives of the plantation's owners, slaves, women and children.

There were obstacles along the way. One week after the lease was signed, we were told we had six months

before the two main houses would collapse. Restoration schedules were immediately changed and, POOF!, the capital was gone. By March, 1994, we were in debt and the slow process of readying the place for visitors began. In August, 1994, Laura opened as "A Creole Plantation", emphasizing Louisiana's unique cultural heritage. Initially, it was a hard sell, both to individual travelers and to the tourism industry. Laura simply did not fit the preconceived expectations of a "Gone With the Wind" plantation. Laura, was, after all, not Tara, never a house of the mythical image or opulence usually associated with the antebellum South and country house tours. Instead, Laura was Creole, a reflection of the lifestyle that made Louisiana a world apart for 200 years.

Our tour guides were bursting with information to tell only a handful of visitors. For 13 months, we were the new and very different kid on the block, and it seemed we were being avoided like the plague. We didn't have the capital to take out glossy ads in travel journals, nor were we mentioned in existing tour books. Nonetheless, friends told friends and word spread exponentially about the small place where visitors were moved to laughter and to tears by the tour they heard there. Remarkably, in September, 1995,

the operation rose into the black. Laura will never amaze visitors with antiques or stories of ghosts or fabulous wealth, even though Laura now houses the largest collection of family artifacts original to a Louisiana plantation. No, Laura's great attraction lies in the poignant, compelling life stories of the Creoles who called Laura home for almost 200 years.

What success means in numbers:

From 19,000 to 82,000 visitors in 3 years.

From 0-23 employees in 3 years.

10 reasons why Laura has been successful:

1. We planned to succeed (for profit-business plan, marketing research).
2. Visitor feedback became criterion for decisions.
3. A unique theme (Creole and Br'er Rabbit).
4. We staked out a position in forefront of national tourism trends.
5. We target audiences (family, children, international, African-American, women).
6. We are visitor and industry friendly.
7. We are not in direct competition with other attractions.
8. Our location is in a cluster/crossroads of rural attractions.

9. We maintain the highest standards of guided tour (storytelling).
10. We pay top dollar to tour guides.

Advantages and disadvantages of operating a cultural tourism attraction based on authentic local history.

ADVANTAGES

- Rural is the richest source of REAL-TURISTIK.
- Less advertising costs, less competition.
- Instant referrals, word of mouth.
- Journalists, travel writers best friend.
- Authenticity is the best entertainment.

DISADVANTAGES

- Local residents don't know it, can't support it.
- Local tourism sales staffs not onto new trends.
- Referrals take time, 13 months to go into black.
- Press packets are time-consuming, need skills.
- Difficult to find and hire good storytellers.

LOUISIANA RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT SUCCESS STORIES — 1991-1997

1991

The Old Lecompte School House, Ann Johnson - Lecompte
Small Business Development Center, Northeast Louisiana University,
Paul Dunn - Monroe
Ponchatoula: America's Antique City, Charlene Daniels - Ponchatoula
The Piney Hills Regional Association, Sue Edmunds, Ruston Lincoln Parish
Convention and Visitors Bureau - Ruston
Mayor Greg Marcantel, City of Jennings - 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, Johnny Glover - Cocodrie

1993

Plantation Pecan and Gift Co., Buddy and Carol Lee Miller - Waterproof
RV River Charters, Inc., E.G. Conrad, Jr. - New Orleans
Loyd Hall Plantation, Anne Fitzgerald - Cheneyville
Constable Dale G. Nix - Mooringsport
Sue and Harry Hebert, City of Plaquemine - Plaquemine
Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Music Festival, Wilbert Guillory - Opelousas

1994

Jean Lafitte Tourism Commission, Nancy Ting - Lafitte
Global Wildlife Center, Paula Finley - Folsom
Rochelle Michaud Dugas, Abbeville Main Street - Abbeville
The Nature Conservancy's Little Pecan Island Preserve, Allen May - Little Pecan Island
Mayor John Joseph, City of Opelousas - Opelousas
Sue Norman - Minden

1995

St. Francisville Overnight Association, Madeline Neville - St. Francisville
Virgie Ott, City of Gretna - Gretna
Kay LaFrance, Columbia Downtown Projects - Columbia
Ed Kelley, Cameron Parish Tourist Commission - Cameron
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, Kathe Hambrick - Gonzales
Southern Seaplane, Inc., Lyle and Rhonda Panepinto - Belle Chasse
Tammany Trace, Kevin Davis - Slidell
Louisiana Nursery Festival, Clyde Holloway - Forest Hill
City of St. Martinville, Mayor Eric Martin - St. Martinville
Baldwin's Guide to the Inns of the Deep South, Winnie and Jack Baldwin - Bernice

1997

Merryville Historical Society, Keitha C. Donnelly - Merryville
M. Leroy Harvey, Jr. - Jackson
Richard Seale - Natchitoches
Mayor Jim P. Petitjean, City of Rayne - 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

RECEIVED
JUN 1 1999
NATIONAL GRANT DEPOSITORY
PERMANENT BUILDING
URI, NORWICH CAMPUS
NORWICH, R.I. 02882