Sunset embraces trademark

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SUNSET — Call it a washboard, a scrubboard, rubboard or a frottoir. It may not have been invented here, but this sure is where it became popular.

For its major role in Louisiana music, the state Legislature will designate Sunset as the Rubboard Capital of the World April 29.

The Sunset City Council unanimously approved a resolution requesting that designation April 10 after Mayor Cecil LaVergne presented a proclamation.

"We were thinking of redesigning our town logo," LaVergne said in a phone interview. "We used to be the 'Sweet Potato Capital,' but that moved into South Carolina."

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Rubboard

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In Sunset's search for a new identity, one name kept surfacing: Tee Don Landry, the man behind Key of Z Rubboards in town.

"Somebody just mentioned him and one thing led to another," LaVergne said.

Landry, 56, set up shop 10 years ago after he shut down his 9-year-old business in Lafayette. His father, Willie Landry, modified the washboard for bands' rhythm sections. It's one of the only American-created musical instruments in the world.

Willie Landry, like many others from south Louisiana, had migrated to the Port Arthur, Texas, area in search of work. He found it at the Texaco Refinery and soon worked alongside future music legends Cleveland and Clifton Chenier.

At the time, the two played in an accordion band on the side and Cleveland Chenier longed for a way to play his wood-framed washboard with both hands. Clifton Chenier drew up a blueprint for Willie Landry.

"He took a piece of stick and drew an outline in the dirt," Tee Don Landry explained. "He asked my dad if he could make it."

With the addition of shoulder straps and the subtraction of its laundry day wooden frame, the metalworker from Kaplan introduced his new cast-tin instrument in 1946. When the Cheniers became zydeco royalty, Willie Landry's invention was along for the ride. These days, musicians consider it as essential to zydeco music as the accordion.

Tee Don Landry eventually took over the business his father left when he died. More than 2,000 customers later, he's called "the Rubboard Man." His studio, Landry displays a world map bristling with pins that mark every town or city to which he's ever shipped an order. They've gone from Sunset to every state in the union.

The Smithsonian Institution owns and displays two of the instruments handmade in Key of Z. Star musicians ZZ Top, Rhianna and Kid Rock are among Tee Don Landry's clients.

"It's still a very small market of people who are exposed to it," he admitted.

In designating Sunset as the place to go if you want a rubboard, LaVergne said he hopes to create marketing opportunities for the town. Scott, the world's boudin capital, hosts a namesake festival, for example. So does nearby Rayne with its annual frog festival. A rubboard festival in Sunset is certainly a possibility, he said.

"That's exactly what we are hoping for," LaVergne said. "I don't know if there are any others out there."

LaVergne said the town also will host a contest to redesign the town's logo around the new title.

"It'll be a great thing to have all of that," Tee Don Landry said.

The dedication will take place at 3 p.m. April 29 at the State Capitol in Baton Rouge.

Herman Fuselier contributed to this report.