A fog rises off of the Mississippi River on cool mornings, a fog that has draped the land since the delta rose from the sea millions of years ago. Today it still shrouds a stylishly elegant mansion called Belle Helene.

For the hundreds of smaller "big houses" that once stood along the river and for the scores of massive plantations that still grace the lowlands, Belle Helene stands resolutely as a monument. It represents a grand style of life that has melted into oblivion like ice cream on hot concrete. Belle Helene is a fitting memorial, though it too is deteriorating.

Workmen replastered the 28 pillars supporting wide galleries of the house decades ago, but everything has since fallen back into disrepair. Ceiling water spots darken the white interior while dripping rainwater melts plaster and paint.

Belle Helene, located 27 miles south of Baton Rouge near Darrow, isn't a doled-up reconstruction. Standing downstairs in the main hallway one looks to the left and right into double parlors, a library and other rooms, but they have no floors. Packed dirt has replaced a floor that once supported a wealthy planter's family and all their fineries. Ironically, those floors were long ago torn up and used to repair a leaking roof. Now there is no floor and the roof has begun leaking again. Vandals entered the house in 1959 and methodically destroyed eight marble fireplace mantles and tore holes in the walls. They were looking for treasure but found none.

Once surrounded by thousands of acres of sugar cane, Belle Helene is now within walking distance of chemical plants and petroleum storage fields. One plant accidentally damaged Belle Helene property when hydrochloric acid escaped into the air and chemically burned some of the trees and plants there. Signs of the mishap are no longer visible, but the incident was somehow consistent with the plantation's problems.

Sugar cane brought about an explosion in the number of magnificent plantation homes along the river and it also played a part in their demise. When sugar production fell, because of a lack of a slave labor force during and after the Civil War, the plantation money began drying up. Many homes were neglected and many disappeared.

The sugar industry still has its hold on Belle Helene. Due to a depressed sugar market for their sugar mill, Belle Helene's owners say they are presently unable to afford restoration of the empty home. Since World War II over $100,000 has been invested in restoring the structure, but much of that work now needs redoing. Steps are being taken to put a new roof on the house and stop the damaging rain.

Distinguished New Orleans architect James Gallier designed Belle Helene with its square pillars and heavy look of a Greek temple. Its owner, Duncan Kenner, was a member of the Southern Congress and a symbol of power in the South. Despite its involvement in the Civil War, Kenner's huge house was left virtually untouched by Union soldiers.

Kenner was known for his blooded racehorses and even built a racecourse that encircled the house. Throughout the grounds he planted live oak trees in 1841 that now shade the area. Kenner named his new plantation "Ashland" for statesman Henry Clay's Kentucky home. The name "Belle Helene" was given it by the next owner, John Reuss, whose family still has it. The new name was given in honor of his granddaughter.

There are a number of details about Belle Helene that fascinate visitors. The architecture includes an astonishing, elliptical staircase that penetrates both the second and third floors.

A total of 27 staircases penetrate both the second and third floors. Squares dominate the architecture at Belle Helene and turn up in everything from the pillars to the entablature atop them. Square plaster molding decorates each room with two plaster medallions (one was damaged by vandals) list among the few trimural decorations in the building.

For most visitors, perhaps the most interesting information about the house concerns its use as a movie location. Five motion pictures have been filmed at Belle Helene including "Little Foxes" and "Band of Angels" with Clark Gable, "Mandingo", "Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" and "The Beguiled". Proceeds from movie company rentals on the house have apparently been insufficient to help refurbish it.

Financial help for restoring Belle Helene may be obtained from the government. Three weeks ago the house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which opens the possibility of funding from the federal government for both interior and exterior work. Time will tell if the plantation is in line for federal assistance.

Belle Helene has fought the elements for nearly 140 years, but it is slowly losing the battle. Like the vanished lifestyle it represents, Belle Helene is fading too.

Around the state other restored and semi-restored plantation homes await visitors to the past. The following is a list of some homes near and not-so-near Baton Rouge (consider the gas problem) that can make an interesting travel weekend.

DESTREHAN MANOR on La. 48, five miles north of St. Rose. Open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily, West Indies design, built in 1787. Grounds feature some of the largest live oaks in Louisiana.

SAN FRANCISCO La. 44 between Reserve and Garyville. Open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. daily. Twenty-two room steamboat Gothic style home built 1853-56. Features scrolls, fluted pilasters, carved grillwork. Admission charge. 504-893-3241.

TEZCUCO La. 44 two miles below Burnside. Open 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Mon.-Sat., 1-4 p.m. Sun. Call 504-475-4250 for group tours. Built 1855, features iron-lace side galleries on raised cottage architecture. Giftshop. Admission charge. 504-335-2341.

HOUMAS HOUSE On La. 942 off La. 44, two miles below Burnside. Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily (March-November) and 9 a.m.-4 p.m. daily (December-February). Closed Christ-