Breaux Bridge's Bayou Parade is much ado about something

Designing the floats begins long before Thanksgiving.

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There are definitely events that take more time to prepare than the Cajun Christmas Bayou Parade. Building the pyramids of Egypt comes to mind.

But if we could devise a presentation-to-preparation ratio for this 45-minute floating parade on the Bayou Teche in Breaux Bridge, there would be few rivals. It's astounding how much goes into this thing.

Conducted at 6 p.m. on Dec. 2 and as part of a larger, four-day celebration at the town's Pare des Ponts de Pont Breaux, the Bayou Parade is the icing on a very large cake. It's the culmination of thousands of volunteer hours, miles of Christmas lights hand-strung onto metal frames, more than 60,000 plastic tie-wraps, a schematic nightmare of cables, wires and computer relays and the involvement of hundreds of Breaux Bridge residents ranging in age from toddling to doddering. It's a big deal in this small town, but definitely not much ado about nothing.

When I can see 10,000 kids counting off the blast of the space shuttle, hear the ooo's and aaah's counting off the blast of the space shuttle, hear the ooo's and aaah's, I'm excited, excited me," said Breaux Bridge businessman Roy Pellerin, the guiding light behind this Teche town's second biggest annual event (the Crawfish Festival being number one). "The space shuttle is one of 35 floats featured in this year's parade, now approaching its third run. From the first year to the second, attendance doubled to 16,000. Organizers can record crowds again for 2000, weather permitting.

Pellerin is about as close as you get to a business tycoon in a little place like Breaux Bridge. But this humble husband, father, grandfather and patriarch of four local businesses bearing his name is more occupied with the Bayou Parade than with any of his business concerns, from which he's now semi-officially semi-retired.

"If I didn't want to do it, I wouldn't do it," he admitted. "From August to December I spend 12 hours a day on this thing." Twelve hours a day is just one man's contribution. But if there's any event is south Louisiana that could be described as a total community effort, this is the one; so many in town are involved in some way from the school kids who submit the ideas for the floats to local teens and adults who help assemble them to the grandparents who help string on the lights to the grandchildren who lay the planks on the aluminum barges to local business that donate supplies, services and manpower. Everybody.

Even Ray's wife, Susan, the matriarch of a prominent family and a lady who could well afford to sit back and let the three work just happen, rolls up her sleeves and pitches in. "I'll be working until the last minute," she said. In fact, Susan said she developed a case of carpal-tunnel syndrome as a result of the repetitive motion of stringing lights onto the floats. Talk about commitment.

The parade is just one facet of a four-day holiday celebration at Parc des Ponts de Pont Breaux, which hugs the Teche behind St. Bernard Catholic Church at the edge of Breaux Bridge's elegant downtown. A Mitchell Bros. carnival will be installed and rolling by 5 p.m. Thursday, and performance groups like the UL Children's University Choir, the Acadiauna Symphony Youth Orchestra, marching bands and Cajun bands will take turns throughout the fete.

With so many people doing so much to make this thing happen, organizers rely on all the preparation making for a good presentation. "When the dust settles and you look at all the people involved," Pellerin observed, "we've got hundreds.

Susan Pellerin has one of the most tedious jobs: attaching the lights.