Big Changes For A Small Town

BY JANE OLIVER
Advertiser Area Editor

CATAHOULA - In recent years, many people have been deserting big cities to return to rural and small-town living. Overcrowding, noise, pollution and rising crime rates are chasing people right out of the cities in the northeast. So it seems ironic that in tiny, quiet Catahoula, where everybody knows each other and old traditions are still strong, many look forward to the opening of a huge, multi-million dollar tourist center next door that is supposed to attract a million people a year when it's complete. Catahoula has always been an isolated community. It is connected to the rest of the world by bayous and two, two-lane roads. Almost everyone there is related to each other by marriage, blood or the back door, as one woman said, "People make their living by farming or fishing. They are close-knit.

Until recently, if you moved to Catahoula and people there didn't like you they threw you out. The people there are mostly self-employed. It is an egalitarian society. Catahoula residents still resist incorporating themselves because it will mean that a few people will run things. It will also mean more taxes. It is a few of the old people in Catahoula who don't want the wilderness center built.

Everyone is part of the family. 'We watch TV,' said Mrs. Laviolette. There are a lot of strange people out there.' She's afraid all those outsiders peering into town will disrupt daily life in Catahoula's children.

'The old people won't change,' she said. 'What's gonna happen to the young kids? I'm afraid of that.'

The Wilderness Center will encompass about 800 acres of swampland in Catahoula Lake, area Cajuns from Catahoula and surrounding areas have fished and hunted in since they came to Louisiana in 1765.

Now, instead of hunting and fishing, tour boats will carry visitors throughout the area. Craft shops will display Cajun handicrafts, there will be a fai-so-do building, a bandstand, an information center. There is talk of buying an old river boat, turning it into a show boat, and staging plays about Acadiana to audiences of up to 300 people.

Catahoula residents say they are happy to have the tourist center because it will bring more business to the community. Restaurants and motels will have to be built. Anyone with some energy will be able to make a living in Catahoula, according to Catahoula sugar farmer Jackie Theriot.

The problem is that now most of Catahoula's young people, especially those with college educations, have to leave to find work. Theriot said, "There's just no work in this area." He said, "I don't know why half of the young people are leaving. Almost everyone with a college degree has to leave."

In Catahoula the church bells chime in the evening, chickens crow and you can hear frogs croaking in the middle of town. If someone dies, a committee is formed to collect donations from neighbors to present to the bereaved family for funeral expenses.

"We came here 35 years ago to spend a week camping. After we spent two weeks here we decided not to leave. It was paradise. You heard nothing - no boats, no cars, no nothing," Mrs. Tootle Guirard said.

"My husband and I chose this kind of life because of the beauty of the woods and because the people at Catahoula are so kind and thoughtful and charitable," Mrs. Guirard said. "But now my husband is in his 70's and I'm nearly 80. We've lived our lives. It's up to the younger people to decide how they want to live."

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