When the boy scouts of Acadiana nestle the first of 4,457 bald cypress trees into the ground of the Atchafalaya Basin Feb. 20, they will be attempting to undo the massive logging of the 20th century that virtually clear cut the 1000-year-old virgin cypress forest. This is not a frivolous undertaking. The initiative, created to celebrate a century of scouting in the U.S., is a long-range service project, 100 years to be precise.

"At our next centennial," says Gary McGoffin, president of the Evangeline Area Council, referring to the 2110 anniversary, "we want future scouts to open the time capsule, see exactly what we planted, see where the trails are we created, where you can hike, where you can camp, where you can paddle. Feb. 20 is just the beginning."

Quite a beginning indeed. The Evangeline Area Council of scouts has partnered with the Louisiana departments of Natural Resources, Culture Recreation and Tourism, Wildlife and Fisheries, Forestry and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to effect change in the basin. Louisiana's Atchafalaya Basin, over 800,000 acres of wetlands, is the largest freshwater swamp in the U.S. Of that territory, 500,000 acres lie in Acadiana, within St. Landry, St. Martin, Iberia and St. Mary parishes.

The effort also reflects back on the state and how money is spent on the basin. In the past, the Atchafalaya Basin Program, run by DNR, spent millions on programs that built museums, welcome centers, boat docks and even a golf course with funds that were targeted for improved water quality in the basin. The scouting effort is helping to return the focus to the nuts and bolts of restoring natural water flow and reforesting damaged areas. Since Hurricane Andrew downed hundreds of acres of trees nearly 20 years ago, the basin has been clogged with deadfalls, exacerbated by hurricanes Lili, Katrina, Rita, Gustav and Ike. When the scouts decided to plant trees — 4,457 cypresses to represent the same number of scouts in the eight Evangeline Area parishes — DNR, partnering with St. Martin Parish, took the initiative to send bulldozers in to clear the 30 acres that will be planted this February. Centennial Cypress Forest, the newly named targeted area, will grow to 180 acres as the project continues over the course of 2010.

Feb. 20 is just the kickoff. By next spring, McGoffin says, the scouts will publish a five-year plan. But there are already glimmers of what is to come.

Art Hawkins, executive for the Evangeline Area Council, intends to turn the basin into an outdoor laboratory for generations of Acadiana youths. As explorers of the wilderness, scouts will log where they go, how many days and nights spent in the basin, how many miles hiked or canoed, how much trash they pick up, how many trees they planted. All the information will go into a computer program accessible to scouts across the country. Hiking trails, primitive camp sites and canoe trails will be noted, although the effort promotes no-trace, no-impact camping. And special patches designating work done in the basin will be awarded.

For decades, scouts have looked for adventure far afield. The vision, says McGoffin, is to refocus local scout troops on the wilderness we have in our own back yard. "We see the basin as a high adventure playground," says McGoffin. "We want the basin to become synonymous with scouting."

Saturday, Feb. 20, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., the Butte LaRose Welcome Center will be the jumping off place for tree planting. Scouts will hike about 500 feet to plant substantial trees — 5 to 6 feet tall. Meanwhile, a cultural mini-festival will take place at the welcome center, with music by Michael and David Doucet, Cedric Watson, Hadley Castille and the Sons of Voodoo. State departments plan to erect tented displays about wildlife, hunting and fishing, and other activities in the basin. To register as a Pack, Troop or Family to participate in this project go to www.eacbsa.org.