From Motley Crue to Mother Teresa, the Cajundome has been host to a great many events since it opened its doors Nov. 10, 1985.

Today, the arena turns 30.

Land that once served as a university dairy farm now houses both the arena and convention center that have hosted hundreds of events and more than 14 million people, even serving as a shelter for more than 17,000 people left homeless by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005.

It was in the mid- to late 1970s when the city's leaders started considering building a new convention center and the University of Southwestern Louisiana leadership wanted a new athletic facility to replace Blackham Coliseum.

Retired long-time university president Ray Authement, in his papers...
I and became director in 1981, with the university archives, wrote in 1985 that Tom Pears, Herbert Heymann and Bob Odum "gave birth to the idea of the Cajundome.

In a 2006 Daily Advertiser story, Gerald Breaux, who worked in the mayor's office at the time, credited then-Mayor Kenny Bowen, Auteurman, former state Sen. Edgar "Sonny" Mouton and then-Gov. Edwin Edwards with making the idea a reality.

Architect Neil Nehrbass was chosen to design the arena. Construction began in 1981, with the state of Louisiana via the university providing the land and most of the money, $50 million, and the city of Lafayette contributing $15 million.

The arena opened Nov. 10, 1985, and the next evening hosted its first concert featuring country music legend Kenny Rogers. That concert still holds the attendance record — 14,000 — for concerts at the Cajundome.

"That opening night will always be memorable," said Cajundome Director Greg Davis, who was business director when the facility opened and became director in 1993. "Kenny Rogers still holds the attendance record because we had to use 18-inch-wide rental chairs" because the regular seating wasn't finished. The permanent seats are 22 inches wide, which means fewer seats can fit in the arena and fewer tickets can be sold.

The arena can seat nearly 13,000, but sight line obstructions like backdrops and props, limit capacity to around 11,000 seats.

In 1986, its first full year of operation, 20 acts played the Cajundome, including Rush, Aerosmith, Luther Vandross, Van Halen, Chicago and Stevie Wonder. But it became more and more difficult for the arena to attract big-name acts whose promoters are requiring larger and larger guarantees.

Public-owned and operated facilities like the Cajundome cannot provide those guarantees, Davis said.

For years, local business people like Larry Smith, Herb Schilling, Russell Chaisson and John Ford put up the money to guarantee concerts at the Cajundome would sell enough tickets, Davis said.

To bring Whitney Houston to the Cajundome in 1994, Smith of Acadiana Bottling and Schilling of Schilling Distributing agreed to cover losses if the concert didn't sell out. It sold more than 10,000 tickets.

"We hit that about 30 minutes in," he said. "After the Eagles, that woke everybody up in the industry that this is a very strong, viable market."

Concert-goers, asked recently on Facebook to describe their favorite Cajundome concert, brought up acts like Stevie Wonder, Billy Joel, Eddie Murphy, Metallica, Brad Paisley, Paul Simon, Prince and Reba.

"My daughter won tickets on the radio to see Whitesnake. She was too young to go by herself so I went with her," Margo and John Latiolais wrote. "She got to meet them backstage, too. I enjoyed it as much as her. Other than that, I would have to say Kenny Rogers was my favorite."

Joni Roy Hamilton had a similar experience. Her favorite was a "Stevie Wonder concert and attending the after party with him and his band." She also sang in a choir when Mother Teresa was at the Cajundome. "I was sitting right behind her."

Shanna Barras said if she had to pick a favorite concert it would be "Metallica, Corrosion of Conformity and Sepultura. Got the tickets on the day of the concert, had general admission and got right up to the barricades in front of the stage. Jason Newsted handed me his guitar pick. I still have it."

"Paul Simon was a favorite and I enjoyed the heck out of the Jonas Brothers, Taylor Swift and Miley Cyrus when my girls were young," Molly Maguire wrote.

Robin Hardin recalled the concert featuring country music legend Kenny Rogers (attended) record being broken.

"That has hurt us real bad," Davis said. "We're confident that eventually we'll overcome that."

As for the Cajundome, it's showing its age. The domed roof is stained black with mildew, but work on that is expected to begin next year, probably in March.

"As for the interior, it will get a much-needed major renovation next year, the biggest it has ever had. The entire arena bowl will be reconfigured. All the seats will be replaced and about 1,000 seats will be added, "Which is why that Kenny Rogers (attended) record will eventually be broken," Davis said.

The Cajundome will close May 28 after a Janet Jackson concert and probably reopen in early December 2016.

"We have six months roughly to do $20 million in renovations," he said.

But the major facelift will be a good thing.

"When we come out of this renovation and re-open, we believe we're going to have a much better product that's going to give us a stronger ability to compete," Davis said.