Gateway to South’s First Arboretum

By URSULA WALKER

Caroline Dormon of Briarwood, the gifted naturalist whose studies of wildflowers are known all over the world and whose private arboretum at her woodland home near Slidell has been a mecca for botanists and conservatists for decades, this spring will see the culmination of 25 years of work and the realization of a long held dream when a state arboretum is dedicated at Chicot State Park, near Ville Platte.

An arboretum is a "museum" of living plants, especially of shrubs and trees, and "there is none in the Southland," Miss Dormon once wrote to a friend; "it is a crime!"

Her tireless efforts to bring about the creation of an arboretum in Louisiana were fruitless until three years ago when J. D. LaFleur Sr., a resident of Ville Platte, went storming into a meeting of the State Parks and Recreation Commission one day to express his ire because century-old trees in Chicot Park were being cut down and sold for timber at a pittance of their real value as natural wonders.

Mrs. A. G. Lawson of Natchitoches, then a new member of the Commission and a friend of Miss Dormon, acquainted with her disheartening efforts to get the state to set aside a tract of virgin timberland as a site for an arboretum, followed LaFleur into the hall when he took his departure, "I think perhaps you have something we have been looking for," she said; "I want to go see it -- tomorrow!"

Her visit to the park that next day led to the setting aside in May, 1961, of 301 acres in the heart of the forest, to be developed as an arboretum of trees and shrubs native to Louisiana and the southern states. The rich soil, the rolling topography, beautiful Chicot Lake, the magnificent oaks, beeches, maples, magnolias, hickories, yellow poplars, cypress trees and many other rare and beautiful species too numerous to name make the location ideal. Even though the arboretum is still in the earliest stages of being developed, its ancient trees and the great variety of flora already growing in the area put it 150 years ahead of similar projects with less natural endowment.

With the site chosen, much remained to be done before it could be officially dedicated. Miss Dormon herself made many visits to the area, walking over it, planning trails, tagging many specimens, supplying plant material from Briarwood, and furnishing lists of other plants to be ordered.

Enthusiastic cooperation was given to the project by professors Clair Brown and Robert Riech of Louisiana State University, whose help was especially valuable in identifying the many varieties of hickory tree; by Donald E. Stone now of Duke University, then of Tulane, who identified the oaks; by the state Federation of Garden Clubs; by the Forestry Commission; by A. S. McKean of LSU Extension, who furnished many specimens; and by Dr. Thomas J. Arceneaux of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, a member of the board of the National Arboretum Society. Through Dr. Arceneaux’s interest, USL loaned a member of its faculty, Dr. Sigmond L. Polisomy, a native of Hungary, to serve as technical adviser for the project.

Now a handsome entrance gate marks the dedicated tract; it is located west of the main gate to the park. The sum of $40,000 has recently been allocated by the Commission to be used for the construction of a rustic cabin and shelter; a deep well; permanent fencing of the entire area; footpaths and rustic bridges; new and rare plants from the other states; the labeling of trees and shrubs; and other improvements.

The arboretum occupies only a small portion of the area in the park, which comprises 7,000 acres, with a 2,500 acre lake; Chicot is the largest recreation park in Louisiana and is larger than all the other state parks combined.

Dedication ceremonies are planned for 10 a.m. Tuesday, April 21; Governor Jimmie H. Davis will formally dedicate the arboretum, but the real star of the occasion will be the relosure of Briarwood, to whom special tribute will be paid for his dedication, knowledge and persistence that led to Louisiana’s having the first arboretum in the Southern states.