What do the Zydeco Festival and Southern Development Foundation's cooperative farm have in common?

Wilbert Guillory, a friendly, optimistic St. Landry farmer, who manages and avidly promotes both.

Guillory, with the help of two other staff members and seven VISTA workers, oversees the rent of small patches of land to families who want to raise vegetables at the cooperative farm.

The festival helps keep the farm going, he says. It also gives life once a year to Guillory's heritage. He describes himself as a Creole, a French-speaking, south Louisiana Afro-American, who was forced into speaking English in school.

Guillory jokes about his "bad" English, speaking like a man who is really more at home in his first language.

"When I was coming up, as a Creole, I did not speak English at all," he said.

"It was not popular to be Creole. Now, we find Creole is popular," Guillory said.

Popular, too, is Creole music, which Guillory links to ancestral farm life — hence the natural tie-in to the cooperative farm where Guillory works.

Zydeco is the music of Afro-American Creoles, Guillory said. It is snap-bean music, he said.

Before being snapped and canned, green beans had to have their tough strings removed. Because they took longer than other vegetables to put up, someone would play an accordion when neighbors got together to can beans. Someone else would get out the washboard. Music was made — zydeco music.

"And the music was almost gone" by the time The Southwest Louisiana Zydeco Festival was organized 11 years ago.

Clifton Chenier was one of its few players, Guillory said.

Guillory became director of the festival a couple of years after it was organized.

"I hope the festival lasts a long time. I hope the festival will be going when my bones turn to dust," Guillory said.

The first festival drew about 800 people. Today, it attracts several thousand for 13 hours of nothing but zydeco — no Cajun, no blues, no gospel, Guillory said.

Once a year on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend, it also draws attention to the Southern Development Foundation's cooperative farm.

To get to there, visitors turn off U.S. 167 at Plaisance a few miles north of Opelousas onto a gravel road at the Zydeco Festival sign.

"If a person wants to farm, he should be farming. They shouldn't have to go to the city where they will have to do something they don't want to do, and will be unhappy. The person who farms, he does that because he loves it. ... I think there is a future for this farm. I just think we're going to have to find the resources."

— Wilbert Guillory, manager of cooperative farm

By DICK WRIGHT
Advocate staff writer

Wilbert Guillory: Farm manager
Driving down the gravel road toward the sydeco stage and the buildings on the farm, a visitor does not see picture-book scenes of a model farm as perhaps its founders 20 years ago might have hoped.

On one side is pasture, where the festival is held. On the other are patches of sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers.

Goats and Barbados sheep are kept in a pasture behind the buildings.

The farm today is a community asset, but also the remaining piece of an ambitious plan. It is a gathering place, both for social occasions and farmer meetings. Southern University has conducted vegetable growing demonstrations at the farm.

But some 20 years ago, the Southern Development Foundation, a self-help organization headed by the sometimes controversial Catholic priest, the Rev. Albert McKnight, acquired the land with the hope of organizing a community of small farms which would buy and sell cooperatively. It was being modeled after an Israeli farm cooperative.

Things did not work out as hoped. And times changed. Yet Father McKnight still has his hopes.

"When we started, there were over 6,000 small farmers in St. Landry," McKnight said recently. "I think you would have a hard time finding 60 now."

Before the land was acquired — by both private and public funds — Guillory worked with an LSU professor on making a small acreage pay. Guillory said they proved a family could make a living off eight acres.

In 1968, McKnight and others spent three weeks in Israel studying cooperatives. They settled on a type in which individual farmers own their land but buy and sell cooperatively. This model was to be tried not only in Louisiana but in Alabama and Florida, McKnight said.

"In 1970, the Ford Foundation was interested in trying to develop what we call the family farm cooperative concept," he said. "We would buy large acreages of land and sell to small farmers who would agree to farm cooperatively in the sense that each would own his own farm, but input and output would be bought and sold cooperatively."

An Israeli team came over to see if the idea was feasible, he said.

"We identified five agricultural cooperatives in six states that we would target," McKnight said. The Israelis said the idea would work at sites in Alabama, Florida and Louisiana. The search for the land began. In Louisiana, the oil boom was on and people were not selling land. Finally, 500 acres were accumulated in St. Landry, McKnight said.

Another Israeli team did a study, but the Ford Foundation wanted a study done by Americans, McKnight said. And the government became involved.

The Farmers Home Administration, which would provide loans, required a land grant university to do a study.

McKnight said finally four federal agencies were to finance the three cooperative farm projects with $60 million over six years. The cooperatives would start with 60 families, with a target of 120 families at each site. The Florida project had 1,600 acres of land, the Alabama project, 3,200 acres.

But in 1980, the Reagan administration replaced the Carter administration and "the whole thing just came apart," McKnight said. The land in Florida and Alabama eventually was sold. The Southern Development Foundation kept its St. Landry land — it was paid for.

But the cooperative farms never came about.

"We will not let the farm go," he said. "We're trying to see how the land can be put in trust so even the board wouldn't be able to sell it."

He said he is encouraged by the interest of a couple of young farmers.

"I just think agriculture holds the key to future employment in this country," McKnight said. And he thinks small farming will have an important place.

Guillory said people who grow vegetables can sell them at the farmer's market in Opelousas and local stores. Southern University has been helpful with demonstrations at the farm. "We hope to expand that. We find it is very, very helpful to do it here," he said.

Meanwhile, two VISTA workers Barbara Langston and Fred Hurlutt help run cooperative farm's goat project.

VISTA workers Barbara Langston and Fred Hurlutt help run cooperative farm's goat project.

ers are helping the farm get a goat project moving. Families with limited acreage are to get a start of goats to raise their own meat. They will give some goats back to the farm for distribution to others.

Persons who want space to grow vegetables may use the farm.

"We give them a plot, two or three acres," Guillory said. They pay only a small rent for a couple of acres, or nothing if their space is less than half an acre. They pay for diesel fuel if they use the farm's tractors and they may pay for use of an irrigation pump, Guillory said. Five families now grow vegetables at the farm.

"Anyone can come and get a plot for vegetable production," he said.

"We also go out into the community and help with problems," he said.

Guillory said the farm used to lease land to soybean growers, but low prices and difficulty in getting loans have left the without leases for two years. That cut down much-needed income.

Still, Guillory believes the farm serves a purpose and continues.

"The farm is a model for turning people into something for farming. We farm here, we keep the interest of the community," he said.

Guillory has a ready answer when asked why efforts continue to be made for farming.

"If a person wants to farm, he should be farming," he said. "They shouldn't have to come to the city where they will have to do something they don't want to do, and will be unhappy if they have a farm, he does because he loves it." "I think there is a future for this farm. I just think we have to have to have to have to find the sources..." he said.

Guillory believes the farm serves a purpose and can keep the interest of the community and the people who are helping the farm get a goat project moving.

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