JEAN LAFITTE NATURE TRAIL

Door opens to history, beauty

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CREOLE — The Cameron Parish Police Jury has approved a suggestion by the Lake Charles-West Calcasieu Tourist Commission to establish a nature trail that will loop through this Gulf Coast parish — and the plan will open the door to a look at history.

One of the areas to be included on the proposed Jean Lafitte Nature Trail will be Little Chenier. It's an area rich in wildlife, steeped in history and blessed with rare beauty.

The Little Chenier area emerged from the Gulf of Mexico about 2,000 years ago as Gulf waters receded southward, exposing ridges of land. The first inhabitants of the area were Attakapas Indians. The word "Attakapas" means "man-eaters" but it is not known whether they were cannibalistic.

By the time the first settlers came, the Indians had vanished, leaving a ceremonial mound, several burial grounds and mounds of oyster shells.

The Indians lived close to what is now the Mermentau River — it was named for an Attakapas chief called Mermentau — where they fished, grew crops and harvested and ate oysters.

Legend says that the Indian tribes occupying Little Chenier, Pecan Island and Big Pecan were wiped out except for one lone survivor after one of Jean Lafitte's vessels brought a smallpox epidemic into the area.

The story relates that the pirates had captured a smallpox-infected ship in the Gulf of Mexico near Joseph's Harbor, and the pirates were infected with the disease. They sought refuge in one of the many bayous along the coast, but the smallpox spread like wildfire, wiping out all except one pirate and a lone Indian.

The two men headed toward a French settlement. The pirate died. The Indian reached the settlement, recovered, and later learned to speak French and recounted what had happened.

Another legend claims that one of Jean Lafitte's ships, loaded with treasure, was disabled and put into a small north-south bayou near the eastern end of Little Chenier. The ship sank, blocked the flow of water in the bayou, and a solid turf eventually formed over the hull. Today, the turf is solid enough to support vehicles and no sign of that early bayou remains.

Today in Little Chenier, visitors can see cattle, egrets, herons and waterfowl in great profusion. Wild iris and wild rice grow near the roads, and fishermen find bass and perch in watery places. Crawfish cover the roads during certain seasons, and crabs are abundant.

Neatly-manicured family cemeteries can be seen from the road, and huge, moss-draped live oaks form alleyways.

All of this has opened to the public only in recent years. After the Little Chenier road was extended westward to connect with Louisiana 27.

The natural beauty of Little Chenier, along with its history, make the area a "natural" attraction for the proposed nature trail.

It is one of the proposed points of interest on the nature trail. (American Press Photo)

The Little Chenier Road provides an interesting landscape which combines seemingly limitless marshland and moss-draped live oak "islands."